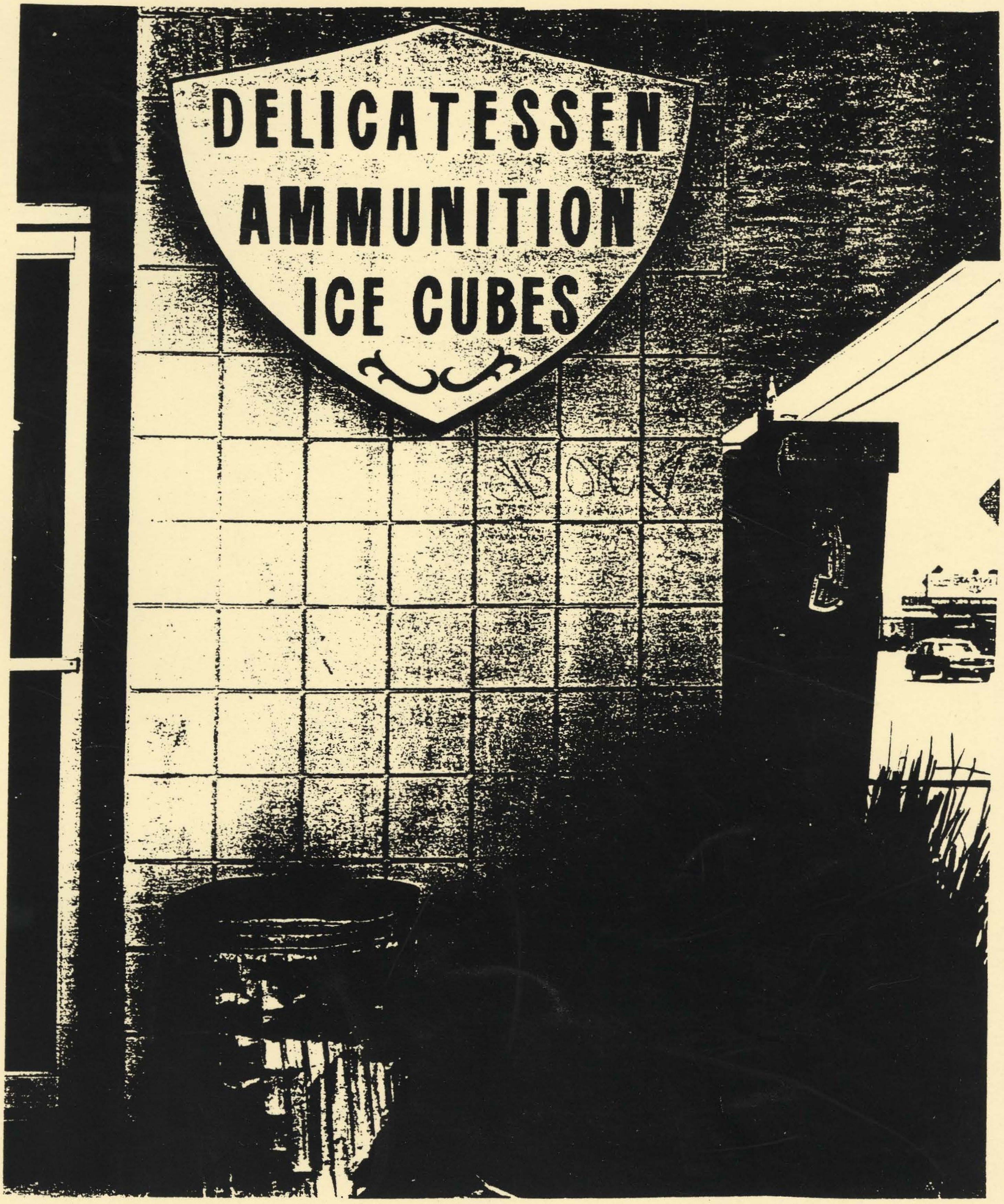
90-91

"SO THERE I WAS STANDING IN THE CHECKOUT LINE"



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The Editors
19 April 1991

The Thursday Parliament Presents

So There I Was,

Standing In The Checkout Line

Poetry by

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Morgan Huff (?)

And Fiction by

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Forward

In this year, every other Thursday or so, several Washington College Students were seen going into the Literary House. It was us.

Baby.

Thanks to Bob Day for the money and support. Thanks to MoonPile Digital Productions for pulling off the more elaborate computer-tricks for the layout. Thanks to Central Services. Is that all? Probably. We're a fairly independent group. We don't take crap from nobody. If you want to step to us, step to us.

Thank You.
The Thursday Parliament

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After We Have Gone

"old saint in the forest
has not yet heard anything
of this, that God is dead!"
—Nietzsche

I.

And after the funeral
we wander down a turnpike runway,
drift past Faust hitching
from an empty tollbooth:

blue exhaust clouds push our U-Haul
through stoccoto lights to the bridge-out sign,
where we shuffle like unemployed daemons,
stare like Arctic terns at the wrong address.

II.

Meanwhile, outside the deserted house,
wind gossips in the aspens
and snow drops like angel shit,
blocking the driveway.

The chimney vacuums birds
from the cloud-carpeted sky:
inside they find mixed drinks
in tiny cuttlebone tumblers.

Sheeted sofas rumba
with umbrellas stepped down
from the sagging Magritte print,
trampling a mis-potted wandering jew.

And in the buffed linoleum kitchen,
abandoned pans bake
for themselves, Barbie dolls
in a creamy malaise sauce.

Roy Kesey

Boarding Call

Warsaw: lobby infected with pigeons.
Sackcloth woman picks at crusted

crystals on something too bloated
for a leg. She teeths on a crucifix.

Her hands droop pouches
of skin like empty waterbags,

daub from a clear bottle,
wrap with another cloth, no cleaner.

She rummages through an ashtray,
senses the eyes of another.

Looking up, she stares at me and will not blink.

Dancing at Midnight, Outdoor Café

The tremble of a cello,
and she curls into the dark
of my open collar;

then rising piano, and she flashes out
like a sudden breath,
she whirls, Sappho spinning words.

Sky lifts a starry dress,
grey cloud petticoats
furl and frill. Wind pours

from the hills, and she fills
my shelter, laughs
like diving swallows.

The air sways with rain
and we race, lightning laces the night,
we fall to bare mattress,

doormice drenched and singing.

Roy Kesey

Afternoon dive, Kaluapaoa Kauai

Ua lili ke lani me ka ua

A baby fiddler crab
whispers over sand,
hides in a snarl
of seaweed. I rinse
my mask, stretch
icthysaur fins onto feet.

Ua o'oki ka lani, po'ele ka honua

I hang, prone on water;
kick out past breakers
to the reef. A final breath,
I curl and thrust
myself down
to a glass and sudden world.

I ka hanau 'ana o na ho 'ali'i

The surface closes behind me, sealed
seamless and bright.
I have forty, maybe
fifty seconds, to drift
silent and slow
through the undulant tourmaline.

Pele, ho 'olewa ke au.

A small ray kicks off the bottom
in a bright flurry of sand,
cutting an arc of blue
through an iridescent cloud
of mullet, then dropping
back to another, deeper ledge.

He moku Pana-'ewa, he oka wale Ka'u

Trumpetfish flicker in and out
of the olive-emerald kelp.
Below, in the lucid dark
of a coral crevice, an eel waits.
It gazes unconcerned
at my studied retreat.

A'ai e Pele, i kuo 'aina

Air waits twenty feet above:
fins churn, and I break
into the high-pitched light.
The water swells and tightens.
Sky is only
a bloodless echo of sea.

'Eli'eli, kau mai

The peak of Na Pali impales the sky.
I sit in the thatched roots
of a banyan tree; smell the red
of a sun quenched in ocean,
taste the pulse
thromming against the dusk.

'Eli'eli, kau mai
'Eli'eli, kau mai

Roy Kesey

Less Easy

It is not hard to measure out one's life
in years or months, or daydreams one has fled.
It is less easy to remember why.

There are endless methods: numbered wives
or tumblers spilled, or flaccid novels read.
It is not hard to measure out one's life.

There are more subtle ways, if less precise;
mornings lost in traffic or in bed.
It is less easy to remember why.

The count can't be precluded with one's knife:
at best, one might truncate the measurement.
It is not hard to measure out one's life.

At no point should one tally up one's lies:
Even if one knows what one has said,
it is less easy to remember why.

The final measure is, of course, one's height,
insuring ample room for feet and head.
It is not hard to measure out one's life.
It is less easy to remember why.

Fares

Certainly not a discovery of order;
at best, my desperate contempt for chaos.

Her slow-lidded eyes
glitter like broken glass
under a street-light.
He slides from my cab,
turns toward perfume,
and strikes at silk bait.
She hooks and reels
him over pavement shoals:

now he pants, flopping
at the base of her hard
black-stockinged legs.

I pull away and wonder how much
longer I can hold to the aridity
of fare meters and airport routes,
to my clean concentric strife:

how long until the only choice
is her Empedoclean love,
messily primordial, but warm.

Next block, the acrid
breath of gunpowder hangs
like morning mist
over two well-dressed
islands in a bloodpond.
Sunset Boulevard
slurs with fat Caddies,
corners hang with wreaths
of children for rent.

Lines blur toward love.
The ocean never sleeps.

Roy Kesey

Scarecrow, and late freeze.

I hang, still as a snowdrift,
flannel-shirted arms stretched
along the wooden cross-piece,
jeans crusted to limp legs.

Crows plucked one eye
last fall, will return
with sun for the other.

My brain, a rag once white
as a coalminer's smile,
cringes on the ground,
waiting to be packratted away.

The straw protruding from my cuffs
burns white with frost:
air shivers under granite clouds.

Field is paved in frozen mud
pocked with footprints;
the soil was seeded too early,
will yield no harvest.

Late Flight Back

3 AM, somewhere
over Maryland. Black land
is starred with streetlamps;
small-town constellations,
a motorcycle comet.

Overhead lamp drops a column
of white to my clipboard.
Wet ink flashes
along the wordstream
that pours me to page,
flashes like the winds
that shiver silver wings.
Ink darkens to dry:
you will soon have me,
formulated, pinned
to paper, sent.

Three hours later, the grey light
of a clouded sunrise squeezes
through a low cleft of horizon.

A glance out the window
drops off the wing
down 20,000 feet to desert,
western Nevada.
Knotted earth falls
in folds around Sierra foothills.
It is a shaman's skin quivering,
loose beneath his chin.
It is my rumpled body
unable to bathe itself.

The stewardess brings tea.
Once, lost in a Kashmir
afternoon, I sat, a shepherd's guest.
We drank, goat's milk
ghosting the thyme-stained
water, a brush of sugar
tempting like a bare shoulder.
A whisping sitar sang outside;
prayer wheels whirled in ivory
and brass, spinning wishes
to the polished turquoise sky.

Roy Kesey

Late Flight Back

Today I sip Lipton
from styrafoam. Seatbelt signs
chime on. Skyscraper skeletons
measure the pallid air. Perhaps
you wait on letterhead
or answering machine.
Regardless, the house
will not be warm.

Man and Woman, Vienna Train Station

Her eyebrows crease
The shoddy air:
In burnished light,
Hair glosses and shadows.

His mahogany voice
lingers like dusk,
glows like amber
held to firelight.

Roy Kesey

To Rest

The salt of the Baltic
still sharp on my tongue,
I stretch out a window.
The cement docks and iron cable
of Kaliningrad railyard lurch away
as the train staggers south
into the broken half-light of dusk.

Departure is a stanza break, a breath of time
to right the lines I have mis-written.

Sky swells with darkness
as clouds congeal, sealing in the night.
The domed forehead
of the engine slips the mist;
hands in the wind-wake
pull at my hair,
water-paint my face.

And so long as the tracks pass through, a barbwire fence
is no more than a rack on which to hang much weariness.

An hour later, the Mamonovo border-crossing.
A flashlight strikes my eyes
like another, oncoming train.
Hopeful questions, "vodka? beer?"
Each car hoisted, wheel base narrowed
to suit dead czars. I am sung
into sleep by the lilt and curl
of Lithuanian children.

It is this handheld love, these rhymes
of the very young that I had grown to overlook.

I wake to late morning and a change
to a slower train: out the window,
the northern hem of Austria—
a world of less metal, less smoke.
Geese scratch for grubs
among hay rounds lining
summer fields. Sunflower groves
burn gold under sapphirine air.

One whisper, too long ignored,

warned of losing the eyes of my fingertips.

Finally, Yugoslavia: the Drava River
walks alongside us;
children fish, parents sleep
bare to afternoon sun.
Dark thunders us through
tunnels that puncture
the breathing stone.

And this promise: if I have retained any sense of touch,
there is the hope of recovering other faculties.

The Ilica mountains, once scraped
bare as skulls, are now terraced
to steppes for vineyards.
Between the olive orchards that grey
the valley floor, the shrill red
of clay tile—a choir of houses,
a Croatian village bright in the heat.

The flatlands of solitude are not wide,
but dark, silent and pathless.

A kestrel calls her mate
to climb the sky that reaches
over the Northern Adriatic:
I debark at Kastel Stari, walk west
into the falling August light.
And now I can hear the singing,
her voice echoing off the cool stucco walls

of a place to rest my shadow.

Roy Kesey

Variations on Segovia's *Estudio sin Luz*

She knocked,
but inside my clothes
hid one small and naked:
I crouched behind silence
until her slow-river voice
sang away.

Snow smothered
the February day she returned
to knock again and louder:
before my voice could thaw,
her bare footsteps lapsed
into echo.

Rain unstuck
the latch: despite the fog
she waited, patient as tall grass,
saying "there is no water
without light, and I am
naked too."

She entered,
sunflower girl with leaves
in her hair, a bird's nest
on one shoulder. The room
dissolved in a luminance
of blue.

Where the Tailor

War hangs like a second-hand coat
on the loose-boned sprawl of the city.
Red and black and calico patches
of rubble disrupt the smooth beige
wool of cinder block apartments.

Telephone lines writhe on the sidewalks
of major thoroughfares like loose thread
on unfinished seams. Broken windows
checker the grey gingham buildings:
moth-bombs eat holes in museums.

A radar dish shines like a brass button,
disappears in dust: the air raid siren's
vocal cords are cut. Guns vomit light
and smoke. Children wait in cupboards.

Thunderstorm, Montana June

Roy Kesey

Someone rips the sky
spilling water down the wind.

Scything through pleated fields
of wheat I run

until, alone with fettered breath,
I huddle under corrugated tin.

I watch the sparrows slip
through a farmhouse window

as though chased by some shiver,
some edge in the weighted air.

The rain was once a favorite dance.

Wet clings to my face like cobwebs.

Wrist-watch, Previously Owned

There is no moral here: only a watch, which performs
its office another way. Its hands pursue the present
as do those of other time pieces. Unlike the others,
this watch pursues time imperfectly: rather than marking
each second, the slimmest hand hesitates,
then plunges forward.

This watch counts only the odd-numbered seconds.
But make no mistake: it was built for perfect time.
The leather band, redolent in black, finds its perfect fit.
The simple aluminum buckle has no estimated lifespan.
The face is unmarred, the crystal flawless.
This watch is as adequate

for the measurement of any event, any physical event
of not less than two seconds duration as any other.
So long as one is not transfixed by the stilted
oddity of its motion, so long as one does not (by holding
one's breath or blinking unconsciously each time
the second hand

should move forward but *doesn't*)
attempt to alter its manner, it is as good a watch
as one might hope to own. The even-numbered
seconds should be of no concern. One still
has them, of course. They simply aren't counted
as such.

Durrell, Founding Father

My Mother Sitting Next To Me

in the court room, the prisoners filing in through the thick door in the corner. As the door swings shut, I catch a glimpse of the stairs, meshed screen on each side. These memories play themselves out as if on a screen: My mother wore pearls that day to court. She was still young, her breasts supported proudly by an expensive wire and lace bra. They were full, exquisite, bruised. I was a shadow there, her eldest daughter, and only witness, preparing to testify on her behalf, on my behalf. These are the things we really remember, the things that kept us up at night, not nightmares as we said, as we tiptoed into our parent's bedroom, whispering as if too loud a sound would shatter our words,"Are you asleep?"

My memories are always awake, clear and cold like the cheap, multi-colored plastic chairs in the hallway outside the courtroom, like the steel that connects them together and nails them to the floor. I was proud in my mask of strong victim. I replayed over and over what I would say on the stand, how I'd struggle not to cry, muttering apologies while smoothing my skirt against my shaking thighs, but the lawyer for my mother's ex-boyfriend had connections and our court date was postponed a first time, a second time and again until I lost track.

The first time, from the side I saw my mother's swollen black eyes close behind her large sunglasses. I wished I could have worn sunglasses, something to cover my bare streaming face. Maybe people would think I had been beaten up too, think I had a reason to cry. All they saw was a twelve, almost thirteen year-old girl crying, straight hair pushed behind her ears, sitting small next to her well-dressed mother.

Aren't we supposed to look back to childhood memories for reassurance and comfort. Real memories are the ones you don't want to remember. Like meeting my first boyfriend, Brian, just a few months after the case was settled, my mother loving him, letting him come over to watch movies in our basement, smiling at me before she shut the door and went upstairs. These are true memories. Those cute stories you tell your friends, strangers, anyone who will listen, those things you call fond memories are not real. They are little conversational exaggerations you picked up from gathered relatives, things you told and heard so many times over the years you are convinced you remember it, remember how the clouds looked, how the sun felt, what a peaceful day it was when you sat under an apple tree in the backyard of some now foreign house, eating the tree's unripe apples with your dog, Maggie, until you got sick. The fact is, there was no sun, it was overcast and your dog was off somewhere else, sniffing out males, leaving her marks.

That first night when the movie was over and Brian had switched off the T.V., I told him about my mother's boyfriend beating her up, me trying to stop him, and about how when it actually went before the judge I wasn't even there, not needed, left out in the hallway, with the of the row of ugly, uncomfortable, plastic chairs. Brian smiled sympathetically and put my head down on his shoulder, and I told him about how the boyfriend's lawyer had called my mother a lunatic, a bulldog ready to attack, how when the boyfriend passed me in the hall he laughed and tried to kiss my cheek. Brian stroked my hair as I told him about how the judge said it was self-defense, because the boyfriend had a bite mark on his arm. I smiled when Brian kissed my head and said how awful, and the smile didn't leave when he pushed me down on the sofa, didn't change when he tried to pull off my pants, or when he laughed as I struggled, because it had frozen. And even afterwards, as I laid there, and felt my mother's world mesh with mine.

Sarah Duffy

Awkward Melody

I dream of Chinese women
holding melons, firm
and tucked under pale
arms. In real life

their fingers curl
into vines, wrap
around quiet thighs,
as they whisper

to their husbands
and I sleep beneath
two trees and the leaves
are musicians

all at once performing
for the sky.

Prose Poem to Me

A young girl sits in empty bathtub, bare thighs and back cold against porcelin. "To be a young lady," "you must wear fingernail polish, shave your legs." With unsteady hands the girl turns on hot water, the pretty tips of her fingers red, as she thinks of her nails smothering beneath polish, their smiles turning yellow without sun. She picks up razor, perfumed soap, mows the hair of her brain.

Sarah Duffy

Lear's Dream

The King stands with bloody feet, crows diving
For the flowers he carries for his daughter.
His thick-furred draft horse limps to a near pond
With ice - covered edges.

Lear calls to his fool, long whisked away by a whirl
Of wind screaming round a madman's hovel.

Through his dissected land, he searches for a grave,
Or a follower' someone to hold his heavy sword
Or tattered book of poems, as he stands
Watching a battle far away.

I regret to tell you the birds don't carry the stars anymore.

"Read and you are always moving," a poet once said but when I sleep too long or miss the point in a conversation I tend to cry and how can you help when your head tilts, hair slips from behind small ears. Shadows always seem to aim for the eyes and you know your pupils are only empty holes. Take a pin and find out but be careful, looking in a mirror doesn't matter anymore and floating is sometimes all you can do.

Sarah Duffy

Little Man

night and my company
a cracked, happy little
voice, nestled echoing inside
my head — hoo-wee
the walls make his words,
his cunning suggestions sharper
hoo-wee, hoo-wee

crouching in the corner
small, his knotted hands
twitching up,
twitching to his smile,
eyes never close,
turn away as he laughs,
giggles — hoo-wee

extend my arms
and he gets more excited,
bounces higher on his haunches
hoo-wee, hoo-wee, hoo-wee
spit flies from his cracked
lips, left hooked hand
moving up — hoo-wee

rising
like the twitching rose
blooming from my arm,
rising like the arc of blood
shooting from my arm, rising
hoo-wee — rising to fill me,
and then fill the world

Inner City Poem

Planted in my Monday morning lunchbox were a pair of radioactive shoelaces. Raumora did it. His grandfather, living in the basement of their eight-story building, keeps a box of eyelids handy for sealing the letters he writes to his daughter upstairs. Her husband has the disease of dead Frenchmen. Their children have eyes on their toes and regretful skin. To make sure the children stay inside, neighbors leave bread on her doorstep, and at night tears from the morning leopards that perch on their roof, make music for them to fall asleep to.

Sarah Duffy

Roaches Don't Eat Oatmeal

My breasts have gotten smaller. My favorite thing to do now is to take baths. Long baths, hot or cold, it doesn't matter. I lie there for hours floating like a leaf, drifting from one side of a pond to the other, bumping into the edge and floating back to the middle, pushed by the wind. Sometimes I fall asleep and my mother wakes me up. She'll walk in the bathroom, straighten things up and hand me my clothes, but never look at my body.

I've been confined to bedrest for a week. My mother thinks I have a "bug." This is how she explains my sad appearance to her friends. I've heard her explain several times about how sick people don't eat and how sure she is I'll get over my flu soon. Last Tuesday, my mother and a group of her friends were in the living room drinking coffee. I was bored so I thought I'd go in and maybe sit for a while. It was late afternoon and I had just taken my bath, so I changed into a nice sweater and skirt, tied my hair back in a ribbon, and went to sit down. She and her friends were evenly spread around our large coffee table, like the Metropolitan Home magazines on top of it. I didn't know two of the ladies but I recognized Mrs. Fairchild whose son I used to go to school with, so I started some small talk with her. We were getting along fine, except for the fact that she was looking over my shoulder instead of at me, and I was thinking about how the gold lizard stickpin that was stuck to the right side of her chest was stolen by her son to be given to her on Mother's Day and about how I was with him when he did it, when I noticed the other two ladies staring at my bare legs. The younger of the two seemed really upset. Her mouth, slightly open, her lips twitching, her hands folding and then refolding in her lap. That's when my mother handed me a magazine and told me I had better her back in bed. My mother doesn't bring her friends home anymore. When I had friends I never brought them home either.

My scalp is very sensitive. I can't even brush my hair anymore. I can also see through my fingernails. My mother has perfect hair, I've never seen it messed up. When I went to a private school in the second grade, my mother was the only parent that could not come to our school play because her hairdresser had the flu and the replacement had not been able to fix her hair right.

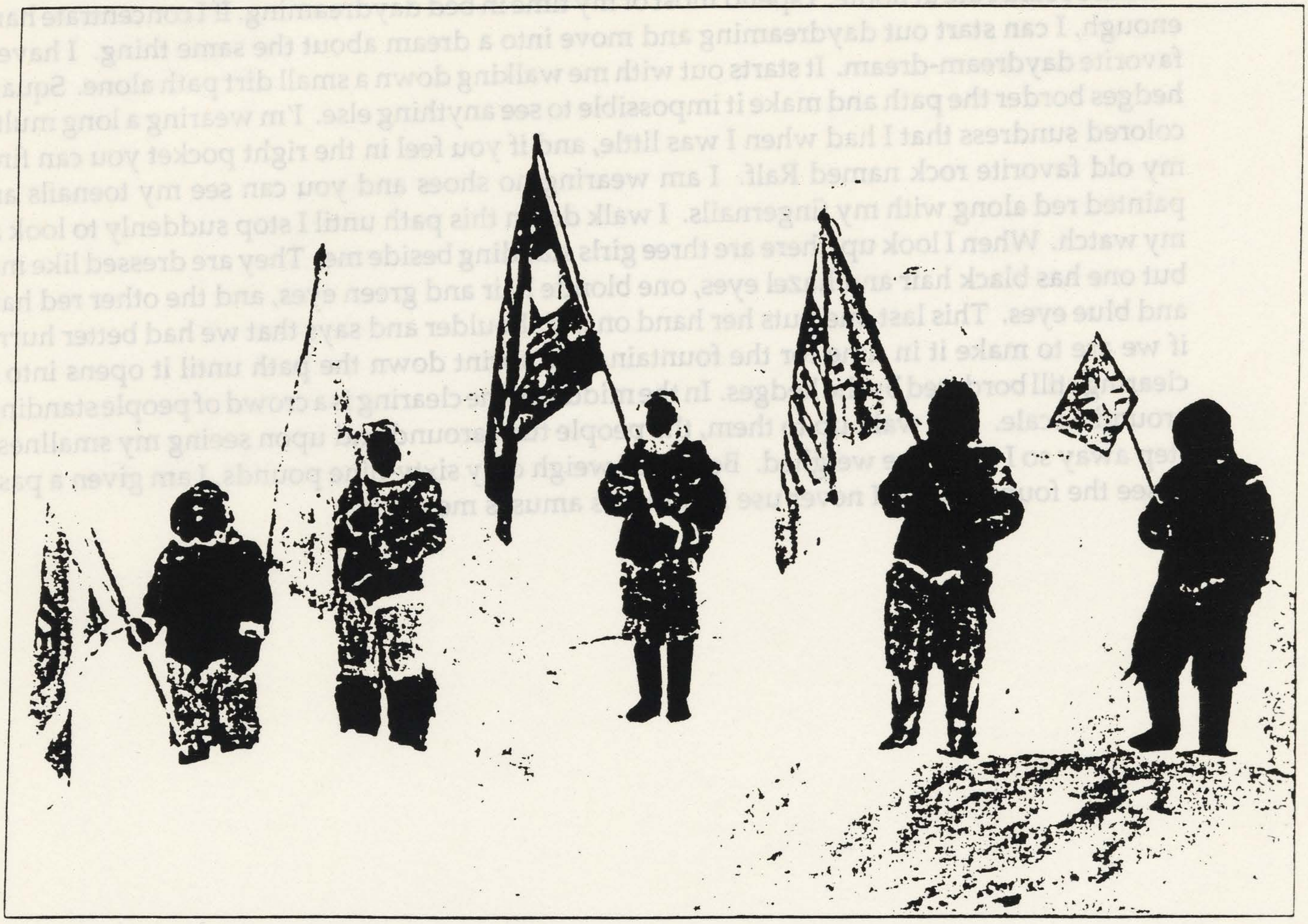
I like my room empty, one framed picture on each wall, a desk, and a bed. There's an upstairs to our house, but sometimes I forget it's there. Most of the things they say about anorexic people are not true. I know I am anorexic. My mother says I have a bug. I used to play a lot of sports, and I've always had a certain fondness for physical exhaustion. When I walk or move now there is a soft twang in my head that affects my eyesight. Like someone hitting a tuning fork but without the sound. My thighs also get numb sometimes.

I first started going out with boys when I was sixteen, and my mother let me stay out until twelve. They always took me to eat and when I got home my mother would ask what restaurant I had gone to. When I started going to bars and places I was not supposed to be, when I got home I'd tell my mother I'd gone out to eat and sometimes I'd describe to her in great detail what I had eaten.

Today I almost passed out. My mother found me on the kitchen floor laughing at a roach. When she asked me why, I told her I was laughing because someone had told me once in school that they had scientific proof that roaches don't

eat oatmeal. My mother said that was very distasteful and I said of course, that was probably why they don't eat it, but she didn't seem to get the joke.

I hadn't been eating for quite some time before I became ill. No one noticed at school because I said I ate at home. I spend most of my time in bed daydreaming. If I concentrate hard enough, I can start out daydreaming and move into a dream about the same thing. I have a favorite daydream-dream. It starts out with me walking down a small dirt path alone. Square hedges border the path and make it impossible to see anything else. I'm wearing a long multi-colored sundress that I had when I was little, and if you feel in the right pocket you can find my old favorite rock named Ralf. I am wearing no shoes and you can see my toenails are painted red along with my fingernails. I walk down this path until I stop suddenly to look at my watch. When I look up, there are three girls standing beside me. They are dressed like me, but one has black hair and hazel eyes, one blonde hair and green eyes, and the other red hair and blue eyes. This last one puts her hand on my shoulder and says that we had better hurry if we are to make it in time for the fountain. We sprint down the path until it opens into a clearing still bordered by the hedges. In the middle of the clearing is a crowd of people standing around a scale. As I walk up to them, the people turn around and upon seeing my smallness step away so I might be weighed. Because I weigh only sixty-nine pounds, I am given a pass to see the fountain, but I never use it, and this amuses me greatly.



THE THURSDAY PARLIAMENT, (and secret mascot, far left,) IN SESSION

Beryl The Husband

Beryl Burger took hours getting to sleep, but most of that time he spent suspended in an odd half-state of consciousness, drifting from thoughts about his sculptures to his family to the Jeffersons episode where George and Loueeze both broke their legs bicycling. Good One, he thought. It Takes Six, he also thought, but that was one of those stray, loner-notions that floated around with nothing to connect with, so he forgot it. All he had to do to forget something, such as his daughter Melanie's total refusal to bathe, was think of something else, such as his wife Beth's refusal to take a stand on the issue on the grounds that 1) It was Mel's life, and 2) it saved water. He could only hold one idea in his head at a time. The other thought would then drop downward into the murky-leveled depths, gone. But then he began to wonder what it was that he'd forgotten, and that's what woke him up.

He blinked a few times and rolled over to his side. His worktable was pushed out of its place because Melanie had wanted to play ping-pong with her long-hair boyfriend. So the ping-pong table was centerpiece in the tiny basement. In moving the table she had tipped over his fractured, segmented new sculpture. Since he thought it was necessary to see the sculpture in its finished state before it could properly be named, he hadn't decided on it's final title yet, but the name he was working under was *Dominé*. It sounded French.

Beside him, wheezing in the dark, was his wife Beth. He had long ago decided that if he was ever going to symbolize his love for her in a sculpture he would use something fleeting, like Kleenex, taped to a huge, air-plane sized revolving propellor. She was a good woman, though, a good sturdy woman. Sturdy Like A Ton Of Cement On Your Head, he thought. Or Sturdy Like One Of Those Heavy Oak Lawnchairs It Takes Three Men To Move. But What I Wouldn't Give For One Of Those Light, Cheap, Reclining, Fold-Up Plastic Chairs Still Smelling Of The Factory, Even If Just For One Night.

His foot hurt a little when he thought about it, but that was because half of it was wood and half was flesh. He usually didn't bother to take off the wooden half before bed because it was a pain to undo the screws and Beth didn't like the negative space his stump left under the covers.

So This Is My Life, Huh God? he thought. Funny Goddamn Joke.

He thought about his foot again. It had been crushed by an American Legion tank during the Independence Day parade in 1974. In Roxbury they always drove a tank down Bohemia Street for both the forth of July and Veterans Day. It came right after the Free Masons rode past on their golf carts, sweeping by each other and performing intricate maneuvers for the crowd. They wore red fezzes and had their own theme music.

It was Beryl's first parade. He had never gone to a parade before because he thought they would be stupid, but Beth said Come On, Beryl, How Do You Know What A Thing Is Like Unless You Try It?

What Sort Of Thing, he said, A Thing Like A Shriner Parade?

That's not really what he said. By this time her voice had given him a deep and churning headache, so he didn't answer her at all. But whenever he replayed the scene for himself he always put up a decent fight.

Yes, Like A Parade. Don't You Think Mel Should See One?

That's Like Saying Should She See A Brick. Parades Are Dull.

We'll See, she said, Get In The Car.

He was pleased to find that he was right; parades were stupid.

Just Try To Enjoy Yourself, Stop Whining, Beth said.

Mike Sapp

How Am I Gonna Do That? said Beryl. Oh, I Know! I'll Go Pat That Shriner On The Head!

Go Ahead, she said. See Where That Gets You. You Can Pat A Shriner On The Head, But It Will Get You Nowhere. Beth said things like that often, annoying little phrases that she made up herself but recited as if they were a quote. Beryl was getting angry, because he was already in a foul mood, but also because there was an attractive woman in brown that he had been thinking about- not all that lecherously, just thinking She's Pleasant Looking- who kind of laughed when Beth said Go Ahead. So he turned on his wife and said Maybe I Will.

Go Ahead, she repeated, You Won't Gain A Thing.

We'll See, he said.

Shut Up Unless You're Going To Do It, she said.

You Shut Up, he snapped. Maybe I Will And Maybe I Won't.

Ok, We'll See, Beryl, We'll See If You Ever Do The Things You Say You Will.

That was an attack centered around the kitchen counter he was supposed to have refinished and the tire swing he was supposed to have hung. Somehow, it had turned into a question of honor. So Beryl cut through the crowd to the yellow dividing cord that separated the parade from the people. He craned his neck to look back at Beth. She was silent, glancing at him in practiced disinterest, Mel hoisted up against her chest. He touched the line. She didn't respond. He lifted it up and made ready to crawl under. Nothing. Bitch.

Beryl hesitated another second and then ducked under the line and went after the first shriner he saw. The shriner was engaged in an intricate maneuver called "Sewing The Flag" on his golf cart, in which he played the part of the needle. The cart swooped out of Beryl's slow grasp and the tank, following obediently behind, rolled over his right foot. It looked to the crowd as if he had stepped into the road for no other purpose than to get his foot crushed.

After that, the parade washed in and out of his head. He was dimly aware that he was on the pavement and there was a yellow balloon bobbing above him. A swirling of blackness opened up in the center to form a circle of light. Somebody said something but it didn't make sense. The last word was *through*. Beth's round head swimming above. *That's Just Like Him*, she said. *I'll Remember That*, Beryl thought. More swirling between light and dark, accelerated now: a bubble-type window that at first he thought was the one his father had in the cap of his pickup until he realized that his father's was more square. In, out. Then he noticed the pavement was moving. *No, I'm on a* . . . He didn't finish the sentence because he couldn't remember the word "gurney". A darker swirl of black than the previous swirls. Slowly clears. Beth's pillow face above him, smiling this time. Smiling expectantly. Shit, she's seen me, he thought.

Beth?

Can You Hear Me? she whispered.

Yes, he croaked.

Beryl, Your Foot Got. . .

Crushed, said Beryl. He noticed her face took on an alarmed and even, yes, a disgusted glow when he said it. Theory test: Smashed, he said. Yes, it definitely caused her distress. For his money, all it meant was his leg was numb from about the shin down. That, and he felt drunk. Must be drugs. Splintered, he said, Into It's

Smaller Components, Instantaneously Crushed Into Powder Of Toe And Powder Of Ankle Bone. She was calling for a doctor, paler than normal. This whole business certainly caused her upset that went beyond just the reasonable upset a wife would have for a husband's unfortunate amputation. Quicker now: This Powder Mixes With The Blood And Ligaments To Form A Creamy Red Dough Of Beryl Berger's Favorite Foot. Yes, he was making Beth sick. A nurse was checking his vitals on some scale or other, Beth was screaming he was delirious. Deee-Leer-Eee-Ous, she said. Almost like Deee-Licos-Ous. Come and get em. Beryl Foot Biscuits. They're Deee-Licous-Ous.

By this time the nurse had a needle full and it was time for another very comfortable dunk into the swirling black.

Even now, nearly seventeen years later, Beth still wasn't comfortable around his foot. She left the room if he started unscrewing it with the socket wrench. If he was in the tub and she needed something she made him cover it with a rag before she opened the door. She preferred that he slept on his back because that would put his foot on the far side of her, next to the wall.

An outside sound woke him from drifting. It was a squirrel or something in Beth's flowerbed outside the basement window. Eat Up, he thought.

Even through it all, he had to admit that some good did come of having his foot chewed off by a two ton Eirdelmeyer assault tank. He began receiving government checks only a week out of the hospital. Also, most of his best sculptures juxtaposed military themes (heavy metal tread, guns, hand grenades) against footware.

I'm A Big Fan Of Your Military Work, a barefoot woman said to him last night at the Roxbury Amateur Arts and Crafts Fair and Farmer's Market. He was in stall 35C and she was in stall 34C, with an entire showcase of small vases and clay pots. To the other side, 36C, was a civil war enthusiaist with about a hundred guns with wires stuck down their gullets. He was dressed up in a Union costume, demonstrating how to clean an authentic Civil War Rifle. Across the aisle the judges were just finishing up with the trained poodles and were about to start with the pigs.

The girl who had spoken was introduced to him earlier as a Pottery Of The Mid-West scholar but he had forgotten her name. It was M-something. When the fans blew just right from behind the barefoot woman he could smell her, and she smelled like a high-school girl.

I Don't Do Military Work, Beryl said. She frowned and grabbed his arm with both of her hands, and they were soft and white, and she led him to his most searing indictment against the armed forces- a thirty foot high sculpturing monstrosity of death and doom and lost innocence. He had picked this sculpture for the festival because he thought that the central object- the piece that the machine guns and helmets and hand grenades and high-top running shoes were melted into was, originally, a mailbox. It was best to give them something that was familiar, and even farmers had seen mailboxes. It's name was *Black Runner*.

Look At All Those Shoes, she said. You're Telling Me This Work Has Nothing To Do With The Military?

The Work, Yes, Beryl said. I Thought You Meant Me. I Have Nothing To Do With It.

Beth was two hours late picking him up. Toward the end they were the only two left in the warehouse. The lights were all off except the small ones that were tilted up to illuminate the displays. They were leaning together, backs pressing *Black Runner's* pedestal.

Beryl wasn't usually superstitious, but his meeting a girl who could prove very dangerous to his marriage on the same night that his wife forgot he was at the Farmer's Market seemed like too much of a coincidence to ignore. Can I See Your Foot? she asked. Her head was

leaning against his shoulder. She mentioned something about drinking some Boone's Farm in the parking lot. Where was Beth? Beryl decided he'd give her six seconds to walk in the door and intervene, but when the time passed silently he decided to tell her alright.

Alright, he told her. He rolled up his right pants leg and soon the shoe and sock were laid out in the floor.

Oh, That's Nice, she said.

Yes, It Comes On And Off, he said. You Just Need A Nine-Sixteenths Socket Wrench.

Does It Hurt? She touched the wooden part slowly, carefully.

No, That's Wood, I Can't Feel A Thing.

You're Very Brave, she told him, and this was the part where things were likely to get very dangerous, but then all of a sudden there's a moral snag: he's got to consider Beth. He couldn't very well do a girl in a barn the size of a small town with a wife and a child back at the house, watching Good Times and wondering where he was. Well, forgetting where he was.

He was saved from the decision by a double horn toot. That was the way Beth pushed on the horn when she was in a hurry. Beryl jumped up, sliding his hand up the smoothness of her arm as he did, and, after thanking her for keeping him company, walked quickly to the door. He was thinking what to say to Beth. He decided on I Thought I Said Nine-Thirty. Very moderate.

In this way he managed to get into his car without considering the alternative.

But now he was considering. The lady with the M-something name could have been a cross-road for him. One of those instances where life takes a left and never returns to the familiar road. That struck a chord. Ain't That The Truth? he thought. The most cruel twist he could think of was a week before he first left for college. Years ago. He was very much looking forward to meeting all the innocent young freshmen girls out on their own for the first time with a powerful urge to do their ethics dirty. All he wanted to do was cut himself free from Beth.

He replayed the scene. They were on her grandmother's porch in Virginia, visiting her cat, Bunker. Bunker had to be kept on the porch at all times. He wasn't allowed in the house and he wasn't allowed outside. Beth was petting him, but whenever Beryl came close Bunker leapt away.

Beryl touched her arm and she looked at him. God she was pretty then. Her eyes hadn't faded yet and her hair was curled from the heat. Her brow was a bit wrinkled in that way she use to have when she was worried. He said You Know, I Don't Know What's Going To Happen At College. I Mean With Us.

She wouldn't look at him. Not directly. She kept her face in profile and said very slowly Do You Think We Should Break Up?

Yes, he said, Yes. She turned toward him and, head lowered, caught him in a hug. He backed up and placed his weight against the window sill. It would be alright, hugging her like that, he thought, but then her shoulders lurched and she was sobbing.

No, he said, Honey, No. Let's Try It. I Mean Yes It'd Probably Be Smarter But I Don't Want To. That's What I Meant, Beth. I Meant We Probably Won't Be Able To Stay Together, But Let's Try. Alright?

Alright, she said softy and kissed him. Tears were all down her cheeks, and when he tasted them he had to hold himself back from crying too..

Jesus Christ, Beryl thought. What A Goddamn Jerk I Was. If I'd Only Kept My Mouth Shut, Everything Would Have Turned Out Differently.

He opened his eyes again. It was lighter outside. The sight of the basement depressed him enough that he closed his eyes.

What time is it? he thought. No telling. He couldn't read Beth's alarm clock without his glasses. It Feels Late, Though, he thought. What Now?

He very simply didn't know. Somewhere along the line he got side-tracked and ended up in a basement with a wife he didn't like and a kid who didn't like him. Somewhere along the track his plans and his reality split and headed out for different stations. Toot goddamn toot.

He was drifting very angry, bouncing his leg on the bed.

"Honey?" It was Beth. He remained quiet and kept his leg on his side. "Beryl, I'm getting up now."

"I'm leaving you," he told her, eyes shut. "You pug-ugly no-good bitch. Hasta Luego."

There was a heartbeat that passed cold- a moment of indecision, and then he felt great. It filled him like a huge yellow rush, tingling at every juncture in his body. *Ah*, he thought, *So This Is Freedom!*

"*What?*" she said. "Are you dreaming?"

Ha! "No, I'm Just Sick Of You. *Sick*. You've Held Me Up Long Enough. Just Do Me A Favor And Take Mel And Hitch A Bus Back To The Country." She was always angry when he mumbled something in his sleep, even just a name or the name of a place. Who's Mary? What Happened In Stockholm? Sometimes it took her weeks to calm down. He didn't know how long this one would take, but he wasn't all that concerned.

When he opened his eyes she was laying with her back to him and her hands up to her face. She was crying. This was surprising for some reason. She should be in the kitchen throwing the wedding china around or screaming at him from the bathroom. Crying! He hadn't seen her cry like that since they were on the porch and she was sixteen and he was eighteen. It was summer then. He could smell the dust.

To test the situation he put his hand on her shoulder and she wrenched herself away. The sun was coming up through the basement window. Because of the angle, he couldn't see her flowers, but he could see the vaguest shadows of her flowers on the far wall. He was trying to endure an evil swelling in his stomach.

"Baby," he said. His voice sounded strange, somehow odd, and not as loud as seemed in his head. "Baby, I just had the most terrible dream." She didn't turn around. Her shoulders shook. "I was somebody totally different and my wife was a Russian juggler or something who kept twisting all the skin off my knuckles when we held hands." That part was from a movie. Beryl wasn't sure if she had seen it with him or not. But he had to continue, reguardless. "Beth it was terrible, I apologize."

He touched her shoulder. She shook it away.

"Beth."

"I don't know, Beryl," she said.

"Honey, look at me. I'm crying like a baby. Bethy."

She leaned towards him, never looking in his face, hugged him very hard. Very sturdy. She Always Was So Easy To Fool, he thought.

Mike Sapp

Ed's Boy's Homecoming

By the time I past the outskirts of Roxbury my left brake cable already came undone so I had to wrap it around the center post and under a black wire so it wouldn't swing down between the spokes. The brake on the back wheel kept sticking. The faster I pedaled the faster it squeaked. After awhile I settled into a comfortable trance of pedaling, in which it wasn't important to think anything except, every second or so, *squeak*.

Without the odd soothing quality of the squeaking back tire I would have probably quit pedaling long before I saw the house. It was small, and square, with a very nice wooden porch on the front. The screendoor was open and there were some kitchen chairs out on the lawn, along with a medium-sized dresser and an antique-looking sewing machine. A big sign was leaning sideways against the the porch that said Lemonade. It was nearly dusk, so I probably wouldn't have been able to read it except the letters were florescent yellow.

I found the guy as he was coming out of a barn in back, carrying a tiny desk. He was old, but not that old, and he was sturdy in the way farming makes you sturdy.

"John Geiser," I said, and put out my hand for him to shake it. He nodded but didn't put the desk down. He asked me what I what I wanted and I said some Lemonade, perhaps, depending on the price.

"Lemonade?" He seemed confused.

"Yeah," I said, "The lemonade."

He asked me what the hell I was talking about. I pointed to the sign. He nodded. "Oh, that's my wife's old sign. She had it in the boy's room, and I'm cleaning it all out now. I just set it there."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry about that."

"He's coming tomorrow night from California." I nodded, mostly to be polite. He asked, "What are you, a biker?"

I told him No, I was a runner but I ran faster on a bike. He chuckled a bit and, pumping his head, set the desk down against the porch and shook my hand. "Ed," he said. That was his introduction. "Let me put this down, John Geiser, and I'll see if I have some iced tea mix in the cupboard or not."

There wasn't any iced tea but he had some cranberry juice that he mixed up in a glass pitcher and brought out to the porch. He showed me to a low wooden chair with stocky legs. His was a metal rocker with thin legs that squeaked when he leaned in any direction. We drank out of tall glasses that were tinted grey. After commenting on the dry period of weather lately and his porch, I asked him how long ago his son left.

Ed was lighting a cigarette, but when I asked he blew out the match and answered "Oh, right after high school. Quite a while now." That said, he struck another match and lit his cigarette.

"Have you lived here long?" I was trying to get a fix on the boy's age, because Ed had to be near fifty himself. I didn't want to just ask because you never can tell what will offend a person.

"You sound like the IRS," he said.

"Sorry. I just like to talk, I guess."

"Nothing wrong with that," he said. "My wife, now she could talk. Sometimes I'd just sit back and watch it, her teeth flashing like crazy. I'd miss entirely what she was saying, it was that much of a spectacle. You know, they say the tongue is the strongest muscle in the body, well her's sure was."

That didn't seem right. "The tongue is the strongest muscle?"

"Sure, that's what they say. Of course, it's different on a woman."

"That surprises me," I said, "About the tongue."

"If you think about it, it makes sense," he said.

"I'm thinking," I said.

"Well, you spend more time eating and talking than anything else, right?" He sounded mildly disgusted with me that I didn't believe it. I said that you spend more time sleeping than either eating or talking, but he asked me What sort of muscles do you think you'd build laying on your back?

"That's not what I mean," I said.

"Jesus, boy, laying in your bed and you think you're body-building."

"I didn't say that." He had me a bit stumped there, because I had lost track of exactly what I was trying to prove, but he wasn't nasty in his victory like Catherine was sometimes. He was smiling, but more with amusement than any sort of personal satisfaction. Or triumph. I said, "I've never seen anyone doing push-ups with their tongues, or hanging on bars with it."

He said, "They're not long enough."

"Sure they are. Tongues go all the way down to here." I touched a place on my neck to show him. He shook his head.

"John, even if they do go all that way down, they're stuck there."

"So what?" I said.

"So even if your tongue was twenty feet long and it hung six feet out your ass when you walked, all that length is still going the wrong way. All that counts for push-ups is whatever part can come out of your mouth." He stuck his tongue out and measured it with his fingers. "About an inch," he said, and held his fingers out to show me. It was about an inch alright. I measured mine and I could make it almost two if I really stretched it.

"See what I mean?" he asked.

"Yeah, but all I was saying is that tongues are long. They are."

"But it doesn't matter for push-ups, that's what *I* was saying."

I said, "That still doesn't seem right to me. What about the heart, I bet that's stronger." Ed finished his cranberry and poured another glass full for himself out of the pitcher. An old red pick-up rattled by with crates of chickens in the hatch.

"Maybe it's all proportionate strength," Ed said while the dust was settling, "Like an ant would be stronger than a man if he was man-sized." Whenever Ed tapped slowly on the arm of his rocker with his longest finger, like he was figuring out the mathematics in his head.

"What I heard is that if an ant were man-sized he couldn't move at all."

"No, he'd be stronger. Proportionally."

"Ed, I'm telling you, he couldn't lift a leg."

"I don't see why," said Ed. "If all his muscles got big at the same time as the rest of him did, to the same degree, he could do everything the same. He'd be carrying cars around on his head." Tap tap tap.

"No, it has to do with gravity, something about the weight increase."

He smiled and said "Explain that to me, exactly, John."

I asked him if I looked like a scientist and he said See there, I called your bluff.

"I wasn't bluffing, besides, how would he get that big in the first place? He couldn't, right?"

"No telling."

"We're wasting our time. He couldn't."

"With science these days, no telling. No telling what they're working on at those government places. Is this smoke bothering you?"

"No," I said, and tried to get him to see that it all had to do gravity, but he wouldn't listen.

"Gravity works the same on big things as little things," he said. "Like if you drop a big rock and a little rock, right?"

I said "Newton's Law. But that's with rocks, not man-sized ants, Ed."

"It's all the same thing," he said, "Gravitationally."

"Whatever," I said. "I'm just not going to argue with you about ants or tongues again."

"Alright," he said. "We'll call that one a tie."

"Fine."

"Agreed." He folded his hands on his lap, very satisfied. The cigarette was sticking out skyward from between two of his fingers. I asked if that lemonade sign was his wife's. I knew it was, but I wanted to make sure the subject was changed.

"Lemonade? Oh yeah. She had my boy's room all clogged up with her old stuff. You know the rat-pack type."

"Pack-rat," I said.

"Rat-pack, right. She was using that space for storage. She had a sowing machine and some buckets of sand, I don't know what all. A cut-off milk jug full of oil paints. She used to get herself on tracks where she was going to be a painter, or the like, and she'd buy all the tubes of colors and the brushes and a hundred dollar easel, and she'd set herself here on the porch and paint the cornfields. That's how all those drips of paint got all over the porch."

I looked where he nodded. There was a circle of small dots, mostly yellow and green, on the boards. They were more dense towards the middle and more spread out along the edges. There was also a little circle inside the larger one that was clear of the paint-drops. I figured that's where her chair was.

"Or she'd be a sculptor all of a sudden, she'd get all the stuff, and she'd get tired of it after about a week. She'd say Ed, it's just not like I imagined it, but floral arranging is really my calling anyway." He laughed very slowly, with wisps of smoke curling out from behind his teeth. His eyes were drifting far away. Just from his eyes I could tell his wife was gone.

And then he blinked his eyes and he was back, just like normal. "So I've been cleaning out the boy's room, tossing the small things out the window into the back yard - I'll go around with a crate and pick them up later. The big things I carry around the front."

"Where are you putting it?" I asked.

"In the barn. I just find a place. I'm not liable to find much use for that stuff anymore, but it wouldn't seem right to toss it out either."

"Sounds like quite a job."

"That it is," he said, "But it's the least I can do, get his room back like it was before he gets here."

I asked him how long his son would be staying. "I don't know," he replied, "As long as he likes. Is this smoke bothering you?" The breeze had shifted and was blowing the smoke towards my face.

"No, I used to smoke myself."

"Humph," he said, "That must've hurt just terrible." He was smiling very widely. I looked at him but it took me a few seconds to understand.

"Oh, yeah, real funny, Ed."

He was giggling so hard he had to set down his glass. His whole face was scrunched up and tears were running down where his eye-squints were. It was a weird way to see him, folded up like a gargoyle with his feet waving in the air.

"It's not that good, Ed," I told him. He gulped in some air and seemed to resign himself to seriousness.

"Okay, okay," he said. "Your right. Sorry, John, it's been awhile since I've had company."

I said his name, and then for some reason that set him off again. He was rolling in his laughter and rocking.

"Jesus," I said. While he laughed himself out I looked out across the road. The cornfields were turning a purplish color as the light went out of them. After awhile I asked him if his wife painted the scarecrow in when she did the field.

Ed looked up at it. "Sure she did. She made me go out and nail one of the arms back up because she said it looked too sloppy to have it hanging."

He seemed recovered, serious. "How long ago was that?"

"Oh, a while," he said. "Quite a while. Are you married?"

"I guess you could call it that, for now."

He looked at me. "How's that?"

I shrugged but I didn't say anything. He let it go.

"What are you doing out on a bike, John Geiser? What line are you in?"

"What line?"

"What line are you in?"

I still didn't understand. "What?"

"Of work!"

"Oh," I said, "I've been in several lines. I've been in the gas station attendant line, the night-manager of a doughnut store line, the poet-playwrite line, and the line of washing dishes at a restaurant called Uncle Eddie's."

"You were a poet?"

"Never a very good one."

"You don't seem the type," he said.

"Hm," I said.

"What are you in now?"

"Now," I said, "I'm between lines."

"Still. That's no way to get around." He meant on a bike. "Look at that thing. How long have you had it?"

"Since yesterday morning," I said. I could tell he didn't believe that, so I said "I bought it used from Edna's."

"Humph. Where're you heading?"

I tried to think of a place but I couldn't. He took the silence as an answer.

"Are you looking for work?"

Mike Sapp

"I don't know."

"Where's your family?"

"Texas," I said, "Probably."

He took that in for a moment then asked if I wanted something stronger than cranberry. I told him no thanks. I never was much of a drinker.

"Alright," he said. I suddenly noticed how late it was. The crickets were chirping very and the lightning bugs had been out for close to twenty minutes. "Where're you staying tonight?" he asked.

"I'll maybe ride into the next town, see if there's a real cheap motel somewhere."

"Not in that town," he said.

"Do you want me to get the porch light?"

"No, the bugs'd get us if the light was on."

I swirled my ice. "Listen, Ed, I hate to impose like this. . . "

"Impose?" He seemed like he didn't know the word.

"Yeah, you know, seeing as there's no motels. . ."

"Oh yeah," he said, "Impose."

"I wonder if I might stay over tonight. It's just that it's getting too dark to ride. If you want I can sleep in the truck."

"I'm working on the fan belt on the truck."

"That won't bother me," I said, "I can sleep in the back."

"No, I mean I'll let you stay tonight and tomorrow you'll give me a hand with the belt. You don't have to stay in the truck."

"I really appreciate that, Ed. Is there something else I can do?"

He hunched in his chair and thought about it. He seemed to be staring out across the lawn, but I figured he was just considering. From time to time his cigarette tip would glow bright orange and then he'd sigh out a small dark cloud. It took awhile but he finally looked over at me again and said "Okay. You can sleep in my boy's room. Stay here."

He got up and went inside. I poured some more cranberry juice into my glass even though I still had half left. A lightning bug landed on my hand, butt lit. Hello, little bug, I thought at it, How're you doing? How's the family? He crawled across the back of my hand in a tight circle. Almost like he was fretting. Fretting. That's a Catherine word. No kidding, I thought, I'm sorry to hear that. They always leave at some point. Don't give up hope, maybe she'll fly back in. Away now.

I flicked him into the air. He flew out past where the porch overhung. The screendoor banged open and Ed sat back down in his rocker.

"Door's still open," I told him.

"That happens, the catch is broke," he said, and gave me some snapshots. There were four in all. While I looked at the first one he leaned back and clicked the screendoor shut, and then turned around and began rocking in his chair again. He said, "These are the pictures I was going to work from," and tapped the corner with his finger. The first picture was of a glum seven-year old sitting on the edge of a bed with grey anchors on the covers. Several baseball pendants hung on the wall. There was a window behind him and to the right. Out the window was the barn, but it was a lighter shade than the red that it was now.

"That's my boy's room," he said.

"This is an old picture."

"Yes," he said. "Now you can stay there tonight but before you go to sleep you pull out all the boxes in the closet and set everything back up just the way it is in these pictures. These other pictures have shots of the other walls, so you'll have no trouble with knowing where things go. We never threw any of his stuff out."

I thumbed through the other pictures. He stopped me on the third one, which showed a view of the doorway and the surrounding wall. The boy was in the center, holding a new bike and looking at the camera with almost no expression at all.

"That's his ninth birthday or so," he said. "We got him a bike that year. He left it out and it got stolen, but that's my boy."

"Oh yeah," I said, "Where should I put my bike?"

"Out in the barn'd be fine."

"Alright," I said, then forgot.

"Look at that smile," he said. "He use to make us crazy with that smile of his. We'd say, come on, smile nice, and that's what it'd come back like."

"He looks like a serious kid," I said. Ed nodded and smiled. I leaned forward and reached back to get the wallet from my back pocket, then opened it and removed a picture of my own. I handed it to Ed. "That's Catherine, and that's Mandy."

"Mandy? Oh, she's a button, ain't she?"

"She's a what?"

"A button," he said.

"No, she's almost three. Her birthday's in August. August second."

"Humph. Where were you, taking the picture?"

"I don't know, maybe."

"Where is that," he squinted, "A beach?"

"Yeah," I said, "It's some beach."

He handed it back to me. "Come on in, John. We'll get something to eat and then we both have some work to do."

Ed forgot the cranberry juice, but I saw it by his rocker and carried it inside for him.

I wasn't done until very late. When I laid on the top sheet and closed my eyes I could still feel the room around me: Ed's boy's room. There was an eerie stillness to it, something in the way that trophies had to go from soccer to baseball to lacrosse, in that order, with a subcategory of height and width. It took me an hour to get the angles on the pendants just right in relation to each other and also to the window, but at the end the room and the snapshots were a perfect match.

Sometime later Ed looked in the door and saw that I was still awake. He was in a green robe, carrying a long yellow rug. "Found it," he said, and laid it out by the bed. "That completes it alright."

I asked him what time it was and he said Late.

"It looks good," he said. "Just like it's supposed to. You did a real bang-up job from the photos."

I nodded.

"He'll be happy to have his room back." Ed's entire face was in shadow, but his hands fell into a yellow band of light from the hallway. They were big and rough like a circus bears'.

"I hope he will be," I said.

He was still looking at the room, like he was trying to see all the corners at once and take every shadow in. " I feel like I'm going to walk into the living room and my wife'll be there on the couch, with her sculpting wheel, spinning a lump of clay around or something. This really takes me back." He lingered another second and then turned and shut the door behind him.

The room went dark. Moonlight came in the window from over the back fields, soft and blue. It would probably look beautiful here if it snowed, but it was hard to picture that. The window was casting the light in two narrow boxes. One was on the lower half of the bed, where my legs were. It lit on the boy's capgun, making it sparkle in its toy holster. The second box slid off the corner of the bed and was resting half and half, split between the bed and the floor.

I leaned forward and dipped my picture of Catherine and Mandy into the top square of moonlight. Hello, baby, I thought, Hello sweet sweet Catherine. I watched her face so close when I closed my eyes I could still see her. That's how I wanted it. Mandy, hon, how's your knee now, better? She skinned her knee a few days before they left. Catherine said I should have been watching. Mandy, baby, I don't know what to say to you.

But it was okay. She was still smiling.

"We'll sit out here on the porch and wait for him while we drink cranberry," Ed said the next evening. "Unless you want something stronger'n cranberry." I had rode into town to get the belt for his truck but it took us most of the morning to put it in. Ed knew more than me about engines, but that's not saying much. After that I sprayed off his truck with the hose while he stayed inside and did the dishes. He wanted to mop the floors but there wasn't enough time.

Rocking a bit in his chair, he smiled and pulled his whiskey far enough out of the bag that its label showed.

"Oh, no, no."

"Alright. Some people like it. I can take it or leave it."

I asked him about which direction his boy'd be coming from, and he said he'd probably come down on ninety-five and if he did he'd come from the left. "That's north," he said.

"I came out on a bit of ninety-five," I said. He was handing me a glass of the cranberry. "It's north-east."

"North, right," he said, "Ninety-five."

I wanted to ask him something, so while he poured the cranberry I steered the conversation into the right area by asking about whether I cleaned the bathroom well enough. Oh yeah, he said, It looks good. I said, "I noticed something in there by the hall. That painting in there, did your wife do that?"

"Yeah, that's hers."

"It was good. It was of these fields, right? Do you have her other ones up anywhere?"

"That was her only one," he said. "She moved on to sand sculpture after that. You know how quickly women change their minds."

Not really. I said: "Catherine was never like that. If anything, she thought about things too much before she did them. She'd over-think herself, get all

confused."

"I guess there's all kinds," he said, "The quick as well as the slow. Was that what started the trouble? She thought too much?""

"No, it was just. . . well, the trouble was mostly her's. Me and the baby were fine."

"Hurmph. How old is you daughter again?"

"Two."

"Nice age." He lit a cigarette and held it in his fingers while he poured his drink with the same hand. "My wife and I had a few spats, you know," he said.

"It guess it happens."

"That it does," he said, "It comes from taking two people and making them out like they're one."

I said, "Mine has more to do with a three."

"A three?"

"Yeah. Like in one plus one plus *another* one." His blue and green wind chimes were blowing around in an odd way, sort of slow motion.

"Ah, I get you," he said. "Was it you or her?"

"Her or me? Oh. Me first, her recently." Tink tink. The chimes.

"There's a lot of that going on all the time. Don't ever think you're alone."

"I don't," I said.

"When did you stop?"

"When Mandy came."

"Good," he said. "You're a good father, then."

"Yeah, I'm just not the greatest husband in the world, huh?"

"Not the worst either," he said, and drew hard on his cigarette. "Now take this for instance: these things'll kill me." He blasted the smoke out and held the cigarette up in his fingers and twirled it a little. "But it doesn't seem as real a fact to me as how good one taste, you know?"

I nodded.

"Why'd you quit?"

"Catherine got on me about it after Mandy was born. It didn't seem worth the battle at the time."

Ed leaned back in the rocker and it squeaked, but he never seemed to notice things like that. "I hope my boy doesn't smoke. I hope he's smart enough not to. Have you ever done that? Think of all the things you want to keep other people away from, when you can't even do it yourself?"

"Sure. All the time."

"Even so, I don't think I'd trade back one smoke. It's terrible to say, but I really do enjoy it." I expected him to chuckle a bit at that, but he didn't. His face was still.

"I know what you mean," I said. "I want to keep Mandy away from everything, but it looks like now I'll be kept away from her. There was talk."

"Was it a bad break?"

"It was bad for awhile, but then I thought it got better. So I went fishing, and when I got back they were cleared out."

He asked where I fished.

"Rock Hall, off the bay."

"Yeah? What's that, trout?"

"Some."

"Have you ever tried fly-fishing?"

"No." I poured myself some more cranberry. I nodded towards Ed's glass but he was fine in cranberry. "I never got around to learning."

"It's nothing to learn," he said. "It's the easiest thing. It just looks hard. A buddy of mine and I used to go fly-fishing on the Tawes. That was back before they put in the restrictions down there about the quality of the water."

"You gotta be careful fishing, though. Those fish tongues are a hundred times stronger than human tongues. They'll rip you outta the boat and hold you under. Fish bury you in the muck until you're ripe. They say fish tongues are the strongest material know to man."

"Shut up, Geiser," he said amiably.

"Proportionally," I said. Suddenly, for that little reason, I was in a good mood. My moods change very rapidly some times. I sat there and thought that we would look very good to an outsider who happened along and saw us on the porch drinking cranberry juice and talking.

As it got darker the lightning bugs began to be snuffed out in the fields.

"Anytime now," said Ed. "I was expecting him around eight thirty and it's almost nine now."

"It'll be nice to meet him," I said. "He sounds like a good guy."

"That he is. Hopefully he'll be here before too long so you won't have to ride far in the dark."

"Yeah, I just want to meet him then I'll be on my way."

"But I thank you for your help, John."

"Anytime," I said, "Anytime."

"The room hasn't looked that good in years."

"Hurmph," I said. I meant it as a joke but he missed it. His eyes were fixed on the road. He was rocking his chair very slowly. "I think I'll go get another shirt, these bugs are killing me." I stood up.

"Stay there. He'll pull up any minute."

I sat back down in the the chair that didn't rock and he kept rocking himself with his legs and staring down the road. At last a pair of headlights lit up on the other side of the hill. It looks real soft and nice until the beams come directly at you.

The car crested the hill and Ed stood up and grabbed the railing. He was smiling and nodding his head, and as it came by he lifted up his arm in greeting. But it blasted by, trailing smoke. It was a long green car, not a short blue one like we'd hoped.

"Anytime now," I said.

He didn't reply.

Soon the lightning bugs had gone in. I was comfortable in my chair and I decided not to think for awhile. I looked at the spots of paint on the floorboards and let my mind drift. Sometimes it's good to just stare at something without having to worry about what it is. Ed asked me if I needed more cranberry and I said No. I heard him crinkle the whiskey bag and pour some into his glass, asking while he did if I wanted any. I said No. Then he asked what I was staring at and I said Nothing, just staring, and that brought me out of it. I looked across the cornfields.

"Goddamnit," said Ed.

"He'll get here. He might have had to stay over somewhere, if he got lost or

something along the way."

"He knows this place," Ed said. He had tasted his drink and must have decided it wasn't strong enough, because poured more whiskey into the glass. This time he didn't offer me any.

"I'm sure he just got held up," I said.

"We'll see," he said.

"It's really not that late, not for coming from California." I said.

"Humph," he said sadly, "John Geiser, you argue more convincingly about stupid things. Tongues and distributor caps and ant-sized men. I can tell you don't even believe what you're saying." He stubbed out a half cigarette and flicked it into the bushes.

I said, "I think I'm going to have to leave soon. It's getting pretty dark."

"Wait here a while longer."

I said Okay.

"I'm sorry about this, John."

"Shut up, Ed, there's nothing to feel sorry for."

He stopped rocking. The porch seemed strange without the squeaks. "Maybe one day we'll go fishing, John," he said.

"Sure," I said, "But right now let's just drink some whiskey."

Ed poured into my cranberry first, as much as it could hold, then poured into his own glass. I think I got more than he did. He set the bottle down on the porch and from it's sound I could tell it was empty.

"I'm really starting to feel like a fool," he said. After that we were both quiet. There was a cricket lost somewhere in the bushes, cricking away very lonesome. At times he was so loud I'd wince to hear it. He was crying about something. The crickets in town were just dumb bits of meat rolled into an insect husk and given insect-whims and insect hungers. The cricket by Ed's porch was so different, so perfectly pained, that it was a real shame that it didn't matter, that it was still just a cricket.

I don't think Ed heard him at all.

We sat there and drank.

And then, from inside the house, the telephone rang. Ed jumped up and went for the door. "That'll be him, saying he'll be late," I told him. The kitchen light came on behind me and the screendoor banged shut.

The fields seemed to rot as the sun went down. It was an ugly moon tonight. I said that once to Catherine and she said, What do you mean, an ugly moon? It's beautiful. I said, Not tonight. It's all pitted and discolored, grey, not yellow, not blue, it's all deadtone. It's a floating cyst. She didn't understand that. She thought that moons were pretty, so it was pretty no matter what it looked like. And the moon from the porch that night was worse than ugly. But if Catherine was out in the air she'd look up and see the same one and say, Look at the moon, Mandy. Look at how big and beautiful the moon is tonight, my love.

I sat there and watched as the stalks twined around Ed's sad scarecrow. His shoulders were bent up in a forever-shrug, like if you asked him something, he'd never know. Hey scarecrow, you could say, Where's Catherine, where's the baby? and he'd shrug.

Or, Hey scarecrow, what the hell am I doing here when they are somewhere else? And he'd shrug.

"Hey scarecrow," I whispered, "Where's Ed's boy? Where is he tonight?"

He shrugged.

"I'll give you three choices, flop-headed hay-thinker," I told him softly. "One: He's one his way and he'll be here any second." I waited a moment so he could consider. "Two: He's

not coming because he doesn't give a rosy donkey's ass for his father." The corn swayed. "Or Three: He's -"

I stopped there because I saw that it didn't matter to question anymore. Ed's boy could be anywhere, and the place would never matter. He could be riding slumped in an open boxcar or smoking in a solemn bed with the moon in the window. He could be downing shots of rum with a water, watching a dusty TV in his apartment and forgetting it all very slowly. Or he could be hung down by his cuffs in a quarry or hanging limp from a tree branch, anything. He wasn't here, he wasn't coming,and the place would never matter.

Tink tink tink. The chimes.

The screendoor opened and Ed drifted out with the breeze. It slammed loudly and bounced out of its catch. We let it hang there, half open. Ed dropped down into his chair like all the strength had gone out of him. The chair didn't even rock, but the hinges moaned under his weight. He freed his cigarettes from his breast pocket, then, even slower, a cigarette from the pack. I saw how pale and waxy his face was when he cupped his hands over the cigarette and lit it. He inhaled and let himself drift off with the smoke. His body slumped but his mind was wafting apart over the cornfields. He could probably look down and see his house and the old swingset and his yellow truck by the hose. He could probably see us on the porch, slumping and waiting, two woolen-heads with thoughts of straw, out late and slumping in our rockers.

And then for a second he was back. "You can have the room again tonight," he said, "If you pack all that stuff back in their boxes and put them out for the trash-men."

I nodded but I didn't say anything. I didn't think he'd hear me, way out over the field, wafting and shifting on the breeze.

A Small-Town Space Opera

But the thing to understand is that there was always tension between Sennetsville and Erma. It dates from way back when they were settled. The story is George Sennet claimed everything from Sennet Mountain to Erma Beach as his, but then Stanly Erma the Ninth won half of that back in a crooked game of blackjack in 1743. George Sennet learned somehow that the cards they used were marked, and so quickly made the acquaintance of and seduced Erma's wife, leaving her naked on Erma Beach for Christmas morning 1744. Erma declared war on Sennet, passing a law that stated that if anyone ever saw Sennet on the street they had to kill him. The reason the law was passed so easily was because the entire region had always been a bit out of touch with the rest of the world, in politics especially. So no one objected when Stanly Erma voted himself into the only body of government as the only active member.

Sennet went into hiding in early 1745, but shortly after that strange things began happening in Erma. The shadowy figure of a man-sized ferret was reportedly seen lurking in Erma doorways and under bypasses. The Ermian House, seat of the Erma Government, (as Stanly Erma called himself), was burnt to the ground, and signs were struck up along the road that said Erma Is Filled With Cheats And Liars; Turn Around, or They'll Cheat You In Erma But Do All Their Wives. That might not be the exact wording, but you know. A small calling card was left at the site of each destruction. They said Courtesy Of The Sennetsville Ferret. Eat Manure And Die.

There was a huge outcry in Erma about all this, propounded when Stanly Erma was found dead in his tent with a note around his neck that said Courtesy Of The Sennetsville Ferret, Eat Manure And Die. The note was attached to an anonymous strip of barbed wire, and the wire was wound tight around Erma's throat.

The more prominent of Erma's businessmen gathered together to come up with a solution. It was this: a crack militaristic army of the youngest and strongest men from Erma, which, in order to go along with their town's nautical theme, they called the Crayfish. They didn't mind so much that crayfish are fresh-water animals, so their reason for the choice of name didn't make any sense. The Crayfish (Of Erma) were trained and drilled in several forms of battle. These early Crayfish wore bright red uniforms and black sacks over their heads, and two extra arms sown on each side. A troop of six Crayfish caught Sennet painting "Erma bites big big dick" on the overpass bridge in a makeshift ferret costume made out of stripped furs, and they ripped him to pieces and threw the tatters into the Erma river for the fish.

But that was over 200 years ago. And, next to all that gambling, adultery, murder, and violence, I guess what happened during the two parades (which Sennetsville calls "The Valiant Ferret Wars", but which Erma calls "The Sennet Police Action") wasn't really all that amazing.

Except to me.

I'm the twenty-seventh in a long line of Sennetsville Ferrets, and to me, it was all a matter of honor.

In the time since George Sennet charmed Mary Erma out of her petticoat and stockings on a chilly 1744 Christmas Eve, the two governments had undergone some changes. In Erma, the main governmental body was open and democratic, but, inexplicably, controlled by the McSwain sisters. Beatrice McSwain was the largest. In fact, the 250 pound Chastity McSwain seemed petite when standing next to her in Erma Congress. They lived in the renovated Ermian House, and claimed to be direct decendents from Stanly Erma. I don't know about that. Gland problems are probably genetic, and no Erma in history had ever been so "majestic" that

the front doors of the government offices had to be widened by four and half feet. Anyway, the McSwains were rich enough to keep a firm governing hand on the school system, the town assembly, and the church, of which McSwains served as chairman, president, and clergy leader, respectively.

Our only rich citizen was Old Man Keefe, who lived out past the corn fields in a renovated barn with a wagon wheel attached to the door through a clamp, so it could swing around in the wind. He sat on a green recliner that he kept outside and spent his time filling huge mail-order balloons with helium and tieing things to the end. He launched them with quiet ceremony. It was not totally uncommon in Sennetsville to see tin pans or cut-outs of small wooden frogs fall suddenly from the sky with a bit of yellow twine trailing. Our neighbor had a goat that was struck by a plummeting socket wrench, but Keefe paid up for it by buying them three new goats and putting their name immediately on his famous Christmas Card list. He only sent cards to people whose property he damaged with his bombardments. He was considered to be a sort of mystical force, and to see him in town was considered lucky by the older folks. However, if Keefe had any political views or even any biases between the two feuding towns, he kept quiet.

Our mayor is the high school shop teacher. I had him for woodworking all through my Ferret years. I graduated last summer but he's still there, although I don't stop by to see him much anymore. The mayor is generally well-liked by the citizens, who view his heavy drinking and foul mouth as the marks of a good, solid, Sennetsville man. During the 1989 parade he was so drunk he rolled off the back of the tractor in his office chair and hit his head on the pavement hard enough that blood came out his nose. This was my first year as the Ferret. I rushed over to him to help him up but he waved me away and stumbled painfully erect. His eyes were swimming around independently.

"What the fuck was that?" he sort of murmured.

I told him he fell out the back of the tractor.

"Push me on the butt," he said, trying to scramble back on the end of the trailer. It was done up like a replica of his office, with a tiny desk and a file cabinet. It was the mayor's idea to let the people see what it was that he did. To symbolize his connections with the high school shop department there was a yellow birdhouse on his desk. After he was on and the tractor started moving I handed him the chair.

"Ferret," he hissed.

"What?"

"What did they think? Was it wrong, politically, to fall off the back?"

"No. No, I think it shows your more human side. It's okay. It shows that you're like everybody else."

He was taking turns waving to the crowd and wiping the blood from under his nose. "But not all that much like everybody, right?"

"You still maintain the aura of leadership."

"Aura?" said the mayor, "Why don't you speak some goddamn English?"

I tried to think of another word. "It's sort of like soup," I said. "Like a thing that surrounds you."

"Soup? I'm not surrounded by soup. I'm surrounded by corn, mostly. All I'm asking is will the people make fun of my falling off?"

I told him no, that they were probably fooled by the part where he jumped up

and took a bow like he meant to do it. And of course Sennetsville loves drunkenness.

Part of my job is comforting the mayor, even though they never put my duties down on paper. I wasn't even aware that it was a government job until weeks after I won the election. I thought all I had to do was lead the cheers at the Sennetsville High football games, and the only reason I entered in the first place was to impress Margot Binger. But by then she whored out with a lacrosse player from Croyden. I think maybe she's married now, living on subsidy. Me, I'm still the same because I never cross any borders on any sides. I never go any further than Sennets Mountain or Erma Beach.

It was in the fall, so I guess I was probably finishing up the bookends in woodworking. The mayor has his office on the second level in this loft thing where he can look down through his windows and see everything that's going on in the shop. He has an intercom to the lower level and also an emergency switch that turns all the electricity off to all the machines. That morning he flipped the switch and the bandsaws all whined to a stop. Then his voice cracked over the speaker that he wanted to see me. A second later the machines roared to life again.

"So you're the new Ferret," he said as I came in the door. Yes sir, I said. "You're pretty skinny around the arms. Are you sure you can hack it?" Sure, I said. Afterall, how strong do you need to be to wave a baton and do cartwheels?

"We'll see," he said. "We'll see. Have a seat, I have distressing news. We were infiltrated last night. Understand, this is all confidential information, top-secret stuff, okay?"

I thought he was joking so I sort of laughed.

"I feel I must demand seriousness," said he. "This is a Crayfish matter."

I said Oh, alright, and asked him would he like me to get the door? Good man, he said. After I sat back down he asked me how my costume was. I said fine. He told me to clean it because he had a mission for me in the name of the good people of the town.

"Huh?" I said.

"This is the scoop," he said, and leaned closer. His elbow almost hit his cup and that snapped his attention to it. "Oh," he said, "Do you want some bourbon and coke?"

What?! My shop teacher offering me whiskey? I said no thanks.

"Alright. Here's the scoop: of course you know about the overpass bridge." I didn't, then, but I nodded. "We own half and Erma owns half because it's right on the line. The part of George Sennet's proclamation that fell on their side was resanded and painted over years ago, but the half that falls on our side of the bridge was protected and designated a historical landmark of Sennetsville in 1820."

The proclamation he was referring to was, of course, "Erma bites big big dick," although I didn't know it at the time. I had seen the landmark often without ever realizing its significance: all it said now was "ig big dick".

"We have reason to believe that last night," he continued, red faced, "Under the cover of darkness, three Stanly Crayfish hung over the side of the bridge, sandblasted our portion, and repainted the section over again in grey." He seemed to be waiting for a reaction so I nodded. "This, of course, we can not tolerate. Smoke?"

I said no thanks. He lit a Pall Mall filter. Everyone knew that was the mayor's brand.

"As the Ferret, what is your course of action?"

I told him maybe he should call the police or the historical society. His face got redder and he began pounding on his blotter. "Boy! I *told* you, this is a *Crayfish matter!* The Crayfish have invaded our territory and destroyed our property! Our only recourse is retaliation, boy, with everything we've got."

I felt weak. "What have we got?"

"You. You and the great Ferret legend." He handed me a green bag. I later found out it was filled with spray-paint cans. "You will infiltrate to the point of the Erma Post Office, and on the door you will paint 'Ig Big Dick.'" He scribbled the message on a memo pad for me and tore off the top sheet. "Then you'll want to get out of there fast. You will of course be in costume."

I held the note out to him. I asked him if it was right.

"Ig big dick," he said confidently, nodding.

"How about something like 'fix the bridge'?"

"I like a Ferret that thinks, but my suggestion is better. More poignant. More historically symbolic."

"Wait," I said. "There's a game tonight. I have to mascot-"

"Ferret-Duties before all else," he said. "Honor, pride, commitment, before mascotting. Afterall, the football games were just a ruse to keep the Ferret active in the event of increased Crayfish activities, and now here it is. Here it is."

He leaned back in his chair and his face went odd. Reflective. "Boy, have you ever read any Space-Operas? I used to love them, I read them when I was young. You know, under the back steps or beneath sheets with a flashlight. They taught me something. They weren't just pulp fiction. Space-Opera taught me my philosophy of government, especially my foreign relations policy. You see, in a Space Opera there's a guy that's the hero, and he's strong and smart and virile who fights aliens to save the earth or whathaveyou. See the connection? Sennetsville is the good earth; you're the hero. I'm the guy in the beginning that sends you out and gets you what you need. It's our job to protect the innocence and sanctity of Sennetsville against the terribly fucked-up alien Erma civilization. I was the hero once; I wore that uniform. But even more than me as the hero, or you as the hero, I've come to see that it's always been the Ferret. It's the Ferret people put their trust and pride in. My only obligation is to give them the Ferret, and to equip him well enough to defend our honor against those who wish to paint our bridges. Understand?"

"I guess," I said.

"Let's get ready to plan," he said. He gave a pad of the excuse slips for getting out of classes. I could see already that there were some advantages to being the Ferret.

Toward the end of last Spring the mayor gave me an extra mission: to contact Old Man Keefe and force him to stop dropping things on people. Keefe had hit on an unlucky target: the Mayor's son-in-law's daughter's wading pool, and had busted it almost in half with a rusty bicycle frame. The mayor had me driven out to Keefe's land in the back of the government limo. (Which the government really didn't own but could get a good deal on the rentals.) The driver refused to take me up the gravel driveway. He said he was embarrassed to be seen with me when I was in costume, but that was hard for me to believe. So I walked up there myself. When I got near the barn Keefe came out to meet me, even shook my hand. He had one of his balloons filling up from a helium tank the size that some people have for propane behind their houses. The balloon itself was only about half inflated but was still almost as big as a truck.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Robert F. Keefe. What's yours?"

"I'm the Sennetsville Ferret," I said.

He shrugged at that and began walking towards the recliner. I followed him.

I said "I've been chosen by the town to come out and ask you to stop dropping things on us."

"Oh, I know," he said. "Have a seat. You can take the good chair. I've got to keep my eye on the balloon."

I remained standing for two reasons. First, I didn't want to get too friendly, but also because I'd have had to disconnect the tail from the costume, and that was a pain. I asked him, "Did you realize were at a crisis point now in Sennetsville? Erma is taking terrible liberties with our, um, well, liberties."

"I know," he said.

"So naturally those of us in the government are trying to plan what actions to take and whatnot, but we've noticed that it's hard to concentrate when televisions keep crashing through the roofs. Can you understand that?"

"Don't worry about Erma," he said. "And don't worry about liberty. It's just an idea. It can fend for itself."

"You put a car battery through the county councilman's tool shed."

"That so? Great, that's some distance. I figured that to be a floater." I knew from my briefings that a 'floater' was one of his objects that landed in the river or the ocean. "That's pretty good, considering the weight."

"Mr. Keefe, this is serious. We don't want to have to put you away. But if you convince us that you need to be, we will because we take care of our people. That's all I have to say."

"I refuse to discuss that," said Keefe. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course. But it doesn't matter, it doesn't even matter on a tiny scale. It's like all those men in the desert. It's the same thing, pride, only on a larger scale. It doesn't take much to start a war."

"That's not what we're talking about," I told him. "And I don't know much about any of that. We've got our own problems to deal with in town," I told him. I asked him again if all was clear and he asked me again if I wanted anything to drink. "No sir. No. I'm done. Except for this: Why do you keep doing that, bombing us?"

He considered. "It's nice to have a hobby," he said.

Meanwhile I was still acting as the Ferret almost full-time. Before my career ended last summer I ended up logging in over sixty vandalizing missions into Erma. One time as I was changing the letters on the Erma McDonalds marquee from "BIG MACS HALF-OFF IN ERMA, DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE" to read "ERMA DICKS OFF," a policecar stopped by to see what I was doing. When he saw my Ferret uniform, with the brown fur, elevated tail and huge black eyes he pulled away from the curb and waved. I think he must have been raised in Sennetsville because we share the same police station since the towns are so close. I had time to add "Courtesy of the Sennetsville Ferret, Eat Shit and Die" before he pulled around again.

The only time I came real close to getting caught in Erma was when I was welding the doors of the Erma City Council shut with a propane torch and a coil of brass wire. These four policemen pulled up by the curb, real silent, like at night when they don't want to use their sirens because they might wake up somebody. I never would have seen them except for a stray poodle that must have thought I had some food or something was watching me as I worked. Then all of a sudden the dog got all excited and turned her butt to the door and started going away. I looked over to see where she was going and what would take a dog's attention away

from the door, and that's when I saw them. The dog helped me a second time, too, in that as I was running away she got friendly with the cops and ended up being stepped on during pursuit, becoming a lucky sort of stumbling block. I hold a great affection for that dog. In my head I named her Stumbles.

By the time I made it to the mayor's house I was good and steamed. Finally the butler answered my door-banging and let me right up because he saw who I was by the uniform. I unsnapped my Ferret Head on the way up the steps and was holding it in my arms when he answered the door.

"Damnit, Captain," I said. By this time I called him 'Captain'. "They came way too close this time. Next time maybe there won't be a dog to run interference for me."

"Easy, easy," he said and crawled back around to his bed. I sat in a chair to the right. He nudged his wife to get up and leave. She slid into her robe and clicked the door behind her. We waited until we heard her feet on the steps.

"Where's the equipment?" he began.

"I lost it."

"Calculated risk. Did you get the door shut?"

"About half-way."

"Did they get pictures?"

"I don't think so."

"Okay, okay, everything's fine," he said. "You better put your head back on."

"I'm still catching my breath," I said, then: "I quit."

The mayor sat up in bed. Surprised. "What would George Sennet say if he heard that? He'd be spinning all the hell around in his grave!"

"His grave is Erma River," I said. In a flash he slapped me.

"You *cringed!*" he cried.

"You slapped me!"

"A Ferret shows no pain!" he said. "I was wrong. You're no Ferret. You're a lousy snivel-ass."

"I'm a great Ferret," I said. "I'm the best since the original."

"An hour ago, maybe I'd have believed you. But when you're a Ferret, you can't quit. Only the Ferret can quit you. So get a little respect, boy."

"I'm sorry, Captain. It's been fun and I owe you a lot and everything, but they were right on my neck and I've got to quit now. Or at least stop wearing the ferret costume on runs."

"Out of the question."

"It's going to get me arrested," I said. "All they have to do is look around for a six foot ferret and that's the one they nab."

"Just a little respect? George Sennet had a death-threat on his head. You have to wear the uniform to symbolize that relationship - that Erma has for hundreds of years been the aggressors. I'll tell you what. I'll pull you off of missions for a couple weeks, let you catch your breath. Think. Relax."

My breathing was finally beginning to slow down.

"Can I get out of the birdhouse project?"

"Sure," he said. "You get an 'A' on that and on the towel dispenser too. Whiskey?"

"Please," I said.

Sennetsville holds its parade on the Saturday nearest the fourth of July, and Erma holds theirs the week after that. The mayor wanted me to get to the street early to "scope out the terrain." At the end of the route, near the post office there were two stages set up with microphones, and one had drums and a guitar set up for Randy Boone, the folk-singer. The street lights were wrapped their entire length with colorful crepe paper and balloons were tied to every parking meter. There were stands for lemonade and funnel cakes by the back of the post office, and the side streets were choked with booth after booth of games of chance. There weren't any rides. Erma rents carnival equipment for their parade, but we in Sennetsville have always been a bit more modest in regards to celebrations.

Despite the mayor's warnings there wasn't any trouble before the parade. I shook hands and posed for pictures with kids, until, around two in the afternoon, the last float rolled past the reviewing stand and shuddered to a stop. It was the tank from the Legion Hall, always a big hit. After that, the five or six little league baseball teams had to march in carrying banners. I snuck away to one of the six spot-a-pots.

I was forbidden to be seen in public without my head, so I had to wait until I was inside and the lock was clasped before I started stripping off the Ferret costume. By the time I was to the waist someone was banging on the door and I could hear a rumble. It sounded deep and strange from inside the plastic sanitary bubble, but I knew exactly what it was. Erma had used tax money and grants that were supposed to go to education to purchase four huge tractor-trailor cabs. They painted them yellow and put the Ermian insignia on the doors. There was no mistaking their engines. They sounded like rolling thunder.

I hurried myself up, but my fingers seemed too fat and clumsy to button and zipper and clasp.

"People of Sennetsville," said a voice. I knew it; it belonged to Beatrice McSwain, the larger and more unpleasant of the sisters. "We come today to-" and then the automatic blowers came on and I couldn't hear a thing. I had my belt strapped and was slipping my arms into the shoulder piece. The collar. The head. I clicked the snaps on the collar and I banged outside.

I'll never forget the scene. The truck cabs had pulled right up to the stage in a triangle formation. There were at least 20 fully armed and suited Crayfish standing around the podium, holding rifles on the crowd. Their felt crayfish arms waved in the breeze. The uniforms have four legs sticking off each side. I don't know how many a crayfish really has, but to me it looks more like a spider costume than a crustacean costume. They had sparkly red belts and another big difference I noticed was that their headpieces were reinforced with metal and they looked through one-way reflective eyes, like the plastic in those mirror-glasses.

The leader Crayfish had a red headband over his stupid headpiece, strung between the two fake eye-stalks. He was standing by McSwain, arms folded. His name was Sandy Kellor. He was reputed to know four different forms of martial arts and was skilled in the use of oriental weapons.

Shit! I thought.

Meanwhile, Fat Beatrice was reading from a prepared speech at the podium. She had extra eye-shadow on tonight. She looked like a 500 pound raccoon.

"...and I'm not just talking about public drunkenness, sloth, and bad taste. These things have always been associated with the Sennetsville parade." There was a small murmur of protest from the crowd.

"This morning," continued McSwain, "Our town of Erma was ruthlessly attacked. Our main judiciary body, the Ermian House, was the unwilling victim of a Sennetsville plot of

destruction." I saw the mayor's head suddenly pop up and begin to swim slowly against the current of the crowd toward Randy Boone, folk singer. I was closer to it than he was, so I ran around the back of the stage. There was only one crayfish by the steps, and he was positioned so he was watching the crowd.

Sloppy.

I hopped on the stage, almost as silently as you'd expect a ferret to hop, and grabbed the microphone. It wasn't turned on. Meanwhile, Beatrice was continuing her babbling. I clicked the switch and there was a loud *thumpf*. Most people glanced over, but Beatrice never faltered:

"As I was taking a bath in the fourth floor Ermian washroom, the stained glass skylight from Italy, which Isaiah Slinggat had commissioned for the one hundredth anniversary of the death of George Sennet, was shattered and destroyed by a frozen turkey launched from Sennetsville."

Incredibly, the crowd cheered. We all knew what this meant. Old man Keefe had himself another verified hit.

"He drops stuff on us, too," I said. The microphone, projected and amplified by over seventy speakers, was a good deal louder than hers. The Crayfish that was by the stage- who had obviously been dozing or something before- noticed me and began climbing the steps to the platform. The next part was very simple. I took hold of Randy Boone's guitar by the slender neck and smashed that son of a bitch leggy ass crab in the ear with it, and he went down. The crowd cheered again. Beatrice was screaming The Ferret the Ferret! over and over, Get him! But I was so full and ripe with my recent attack I didn't run. I just kicked that sorry son of a bitch off the stage with my furry steel-toed Ferret boots.

In the uprising to get me, Sandy Kellor came running through the crowd to get to me. One guy made to hold him up but all of a sudden he was on the ground and Kellor hadn't even slowed down. I think that's why more people didn't fight just then, they saw that.

The mayor was waving his arms at me -not in concern- he wanted the microphone. I unhooked it from the pole and sent it flying. The wire caught on something and fell short, but one of the townspeople got a hold of it and tossed it the rest of the way to the mayor. He brought it to his lips and said:

"Hhurmph!" (That's how he cleared his throat: threatening.)

Meanwhile I had the metal microphone pole in my hands ready for that Sandy Kellor bastard. He started up the steps slowly, like he was measuring each step to see how close he could come. Seeing him there in his stupid-shit costume, I was ready to split his skull.

Beatrice was still babbling from her prepared speech, maybe afraid she was losing her audience, because she was yelling out the words at a break-neck speed. "I am filing a court order to have this Keefe put away. I am also suing the town of Sennetsville for a billion dollars, to demonstrate that we of Erma can not tolerate such evil, malicious, and pre-meditated aerial turkey attacks."

"Like shit!" screamed the mayor. His voice crashed towards the other stage. "It's everyman's right to launch frozen turkey balloons you fat lard ass bitch!"

Sandy Kellor stepped into range and I let swing with the pole. He stooped below the attack and there was a flash of his red feet, bright light, and I stumbled back. The bastard karated me in the chops. I swung again but my helmet was a bit

in the way, and he was on my blind side all of a sudden. He sweeped my legs, and I went down hard. I chomped down on my tongue and blood started backing up in my mouth. I couldn't move anything except my left foot.

He stood above me, looking down, his fake arms swaying. He flipped up his crayfish head and winked at me. *Winked!* Then he swooped around and was gone.

I rolled to my side and watched as the crayfish swamped down around the stage and hurried Beatrice McSwain into one of the cabs and rattled off, the other trucks close behind. The townspeople were chasing them, throwing stones and bottles until they were too far away.

The mayor was on the microphone.

"This is war," he said. "We didn't start it, but we'll goddamn finish it alright. They want to smash in here and take over our parade? So they have an army of Stanly Crayfish? Well, we've never been much of an overly militaristic town. We've only got one mascot to stand up for our pride and liberty! We're peacelovers here! But let's get that Ferret into some karate classes, because we're going to kick us some Crayfish ass!"

The crowd cheered.

The week before the Erma Parade was a wash of activity- martial arts classes, street-fighting, and military strategies. I was passed from townsman to townsman, each one demonstrating a new chokehold from Viet Nam or giving me advice on the best times for attack. Mr. Mogpan showed me his favorite choke from World War II training which he called The Lightning Neck-Snap, and Mrs. Mogpan gave me a huge red switchblade.

"What's this?" I asked her.

"A Crayfish Sticker," she said. "You stick 'em with that." Mrs. Mogpan was a kindly lady with grey hair and red, full cheeks. "That'll stop the bastard," she said.

The parade was Saturday morning. Friday night I was awakened by a phone call. The mayor wanted to see me. Bring your costume, he said, In a bag.

The school was unlocked when I got there so I knew I was late. I cut through the cafeteria to make up time. It's odd how different it looked at night, and how peaceful it seemed. Usually its filled with kids screaming and throwing stuff around, but that night it almost seemed sacred. I got to the woodworking area and opened the door.

The mayor's office was lit up and from the floor I could look up and see him in his little glass box, hunched over his desk and smoking. I climbed the steps and went in.

"Ferret," he said.

"Captain."

"Have a seat. Drink?"

"Please." The mayor poured my whiskey into my regular shot glass, It had a picture of a leprechaun leaning against a huge mushroom. Or maybe the mushroom was normal sized, only the leprechaun was very very short. Never occurred to me. He also offered me a smoke, for which I was grateful.

He asked me if I had received the plans. I told him Yes, they arrived in the morning mail.

"Fine," he said. "Fine. I'm here tonight to ask you one thing: what do you need?"

I threw back the shot. It burned, but I never let pain show when I'm with the mayor.

I put on my brown fuzzy boots first, lacing them slow and tight in the still morning shadows of Sennet Mountain. The laces sounded crisp sliding through the loops. I belted the bottom half around my waist and buttoned on my tail. Before I clamped on the chestplate I slid Mrs. Mogpan's switchblade into an inside pocket. It fit snugly, like that's just what the pocket was

made for. I pulled on my gloves, first the left then the right, all the way past my elbow then snapped the elastic down. The birds were beginning to wake up. I slid into the belly-piece and threaded the clasp, pulling it tighter than usual.

The headpiece was against a knot of tree roots. As I lifted it, sunlight glinted down and sparkled on the black nose. I Am The Ferret, I thought.

I Am Ready To Hunt.

I had a guy from the the legion sit next to the mayor to drive the tank as I stood on the top, leaning against the turret. The mayor had got me what I asked for: besides the Eirlemeyer tank, no police intervention, a microphone set up to speakers on the back of the tank, and an automatic rifle. I think the rifle was his wife's. It had her initials burned into the stock.

Behind me was all of Sennetsville, riding in dusty pick-ups and economy Escorts. There were some station wagons and a few straggling bikers, struggling to steer and hold their guns across their handlebars at the same time. Morale was good; they were hooting and yelling and screaming Eat shit and die! and Kill Erma! Every time I lifted my arm they cheered.

Erma expected us. There was a small roadblock set up on the far side of the Overpass Bridge, but what they didn't expect was for us to have a tank. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to smuggle missiles in for it, but even so I'm sure it was an impressive sight to see it chugging its heavy way towards them.

We ran over their cars and kept going. One guy tried to run close to the tank and got himself shot in the knee. He fell down and couldn't do anything but watch as all the cars went by, whooping and hollering and caking him with dust.

And we rolled right up to Main Street. Erma's parade was already finished, so all the floats were parked catty-cornered in the side-roads. A ferris wheel clicked it's slow way around and they had one of those scramblers, too. A regular amusement park. Randy Boone, the folk singer, was crooning about doves and rivers or something and playing an accordion because I had busted his guitar last week. You'd figure he'd have more than one. I considered letting him finish before taking over, out of respect for his dead instrument, but the mayor came up out of the tank and patted me very firmly on the shoulder. All behind us were the cars and trucks of Sennetsville, with a shotgun sticking out from every window. The crowd began to turn around, noticing our arrival as something out of the ordinary.

There were only a few Crayfish on the scene. They ran south down Nackdon Street, probably for reinforcements. I clicked on the microphone and handed it to the mayor. The crowd was begin to surge and flow in angry little waves. My job today, as the mayor defined it, was to "stand to my right real tough while I talk." That's what I was doing.

"Hurrmph!" he spat, then: "Where's your fat-ass executive?" Everyone was silent. Finally a bookish man in glasses took Randy Boone's microphone and said "Mrs. Beatrice McSwain cannot be reached at the present time - "

"Where is she?" barked the mayor.

"She's taken a brief vacation in the - "

"During her own town's goddamn parade?" he said, "Jesus Christ! Well, our business is with these people just as much as it is with her. After all, you elected her." I noticed several Crayfish sidestepping their ways around corners with their

automatic rifles. They marched through the crowd in their bright red Crayfish costumes, but somehow the mayor didn't notice. He was still talking about the democratic principle and how the people of Erma had fucked it up all through history. I pulled on his elbow but he pushed my arm away and kept talking:

"You people owe us an apology," he was saying. "You don't ruin another town's parade, you just don't."

Sandy Kellor, the Crayfish in the lead, dropped to his knees from a dead run twenty feet away from the tank and propped up his rifle. I lifted mine at the same time and threw the bulk of my Ferret costume against the mayor. He toppled, and both shots were fired. The gun blasted into my shoulder, made it feel warm. It was hard to tell if I hit anyone looking through the screen I had worked into the mouth of the Ferret head, so I fired again.

And that's what started the riot.

The noise was unbearable. My head was ringing from the blast of my own gun and there were also screams and glass breaking out of store-front windows. I got the mayor into the hatch of the tank and shut the lid. There was a mechanical click and I knew he'd locked it. As the tank started to move I jumped off into the street between two Crayfish. They didn't seem to have captured the rhythm of the battle yet. I hit one broadside with the barrel and his head flipped off and he was splayed in the road. The other one started to back off and I gave it to him with the stock.

All around me Erma was taking its lumps. They didn't seem to be able to react quickly enough. The guy at Boone's mike kept shouting What Are You Doing What Are You Doing into the air. I cut back through the crowd, breathing heavy, and came up behind a furniture store. O'Croyers. I rested behind its dumpster for a second reloading. If I could get to the roof somehow that could be turned to good use. Maybe even get the drop on that Kellor bastard.

I busted through the back door and came out through the front, crouching in the shadows by the picture window. All the stores were closed for the parade. A car was turned over and as I watched it it exploded in a calm flash of orange, muffled through the glass. All this while the tank was rolling slowly up the street towards the Ermian house. There were three Crayfish running after it, each with one hand on the handle of a large red can.

Gasoline.

I cocked the gun and went for the door. Locked. I dropped back and fired a hole in through the glass, widened it, and leapt through running. I got to the tank just as they did. They were unscrewing the top of the can. If I fired my gun that'd set off the gas, maybe, and that'd be like finishing their job for them. They knew that. They were taking their time.

Then the tank shuddered to a stop. I pounded on its rear to get it to go again, but it didn't move. So I had to move to them.

One of the Crayfish took possession of the can and dived behind the other two. Mr. Mogpan's neck-snap took care of the first one, but while my hands were busy the other one took a metal pole to my back. As he cocked to swing again I shoved my gun so far up his face his head snapped back and he was dazed for a second, bloody-chinned. I hit him again, twice at least, and he fell.

The Crayfish with the can just stood there. I started towards him. The blood was in my mouth again. He took a step back and I tracked him just as slow, leaning my head over just enough so he'd get the full effect of the Ferret eyes and the Ferret teeth. Another step. Another.

The mayor said something over the speakers. He was half-way out of the hatch, holding the microphone very close to his lips. "Excuse me, I have news," he said. One more step and

the Crayfish would be pinned and ripe for the picking. Perhaps I'd try the knife.

"Ferret," said the mayor. I glanced up. He was standing stooped. Like somebody took half his spine out his back. He looked old. Behind me, another car went up in a flash of orange and some people fell under the scraps.

"Please," said the mayor, "I have news. We're at war."

Someone shouted No Shit and launched a bottle in his direction.

"Not us," he said, "I mean America."

And all the fighting stopped. It didn't slow down, it just *ended*. And everyone looked at him. His shoulders were low and he was holding a transistor radio in his left hand. A piece of hair kept blowing around on his head but everything else was still. The guy with the gas can set it down very slowly in the street. I was still holding the gun. There was blood all up and down the shaft, some dripping off slower than normal from the barrel.

The turret of the tank revolved slowly and when it was set back towards Erma it began to rumble it's slow way home. Everyone was released, sluggishly, to move along. No one looked at anyone else.

There was a cry behind me: "Ferret!"

I turned around. Slow. Like a kid's toy robot that goes click click click when it swivels around. It was Sandy Kellor.

"Call me Gary," I said. I unsnapped the Ferret head and let it drop. When it hit the road it sounded very hollow.

"Ferret," he said, *"We're not done."*

I dropped the gun too. It rattled. I worried very vaguely about scratching the stock.

He smiled when I dropped it and started coming at me. The street was clear. I stayed where I was, purposefully frozen.

As he got near he started doing flips and karate windups where he jumped in the air and twisted around, all the time gaining more and more speed. The arms of his costume bent back in tandem. And I was still. Twenty feet. Ten. He launched into a high flip, tightly tucked against the wind. On the apex of his arc a stainless steel pan fell from the clouds and clipped the antenna right off his helmet. He fell in a heap three feet from my boots.

The pan rang for minutes, sounding low on the main street of Erma.

And then the rains came.

Old Man Gravy

Myself, I don't know much about what it all meant, or how to tell a story you'd be interested in, but I can tell you the thing which happened to me when I was still digging graves out down in Saint Mary's The Blessed Virgin graveyard. They have a lovely cemetery out there. Small, but that keeps it nicer that way. More personal.

I've been trying to piece meaning together out of it. All it means to me is I keep wanting cigarettes when I think about it, even though I quit eleven years ago on advice from my doctor. Technically. I count it as eleven as long as Vallerie doesn't catch me at it, and I don't think she will with the window left open. Got the fan blowing out, too.

I'm digging somewhere on the lower edge, out by the stone wall that separates the graves from Edison Avenue. This old fellow in a jacket sort of like mine came out of the office and started up the hill, one hand in his pocket and one hand holding a smoke, just looking at all the headstones and stooping here and there to read the more interesting ones. He was swinging his head from one side to the other real slowly, looking at everything from the right to the left then from left to right. As he got closer I can see he was wearing an odd black hat and had a bit of a limp in one of his legs. Also he had these thick black rimmed glasses that looked like the sort they wear when they're carving the slabs of marble. He limped his way up, and, still coming towards me, sort of smiled and nodded and from the way he did it I can tell he meant to talk.

Me, I prefer to do work when I'm supposed to be working. A lot of the younger guys stop digging as soon as the boss goes down the road for something, but I find that sort of wrong. I don't know. But I'll talk to people if they come up and I have the time. So he limped up and stuck out his hand and said Hello, my name is Mister Something Gravy, I wonder if you can answer me some questions.

I say I'll try but I can't guarantee him anything.

He took out a folded piece of paper and handed it to me. It was the forms they give out for a plot. He asked me to show him exactly where it was. I'm almost done the grave I'm working on so I figure I can spare him the time. I stick my shovel down in the soil so it's handle is in the air and walk over to where the form says the plot will be. He followed me slowly because he kept reading the stones as he went.

"Here it is," I say. It didn't look like much now, just normal ground. There was a grave to the right and one to the left a few plots off. "32 F."

"Which way," he asked.

"Headstone faces that way, toward the road."

He turned around and knelt by where the stone would be and looked out over the hill. "Hm," said old mister Gravy. His cigarette was almost gone so he stubbed it out it the dirt by his feet. He stayed there crouched for a few seconds. "I'm sorry," he said all at once, "I don't think I know your name."

This is my fault, obviously, because I didn't tell him mine when he told me his. "Sorry. Jack Harnichick. I'm a grave-digger." I know this is obvious, too. I'm just so used to people asking who I am then what I do in that order. Some people are surprised when I say my job. I guess surprised is the word for it. I used to wonder if I should put it off, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. Vallerie says there's dignity in any job.

Old man Gravy was already digging around in his jacket for another smoke, and as he fumbled it together he asked if I wanted one. I tell him no, I never smoke them. And then he

was trying to get up again but he was having a bit of trouble with his one leg. He was half way up, tettering, and I'm wondering if I should help him or not. While I'm wondering he got upright, patted down the pockets on his coat, and nodded. The match he threw down exactly where the plot will be.

Even upright, his one leg kept him from standing level. "I wonder," he said, "If you can show me the oldest grave?"

I take him to the oldest grave I can think of. It's way back in a corner of the yard that we don't really own anymore, surrounded by thickets and brambles. I grab my shovel on the way by to cut a path back to the grave. Randolf Kree : 1760-1792. Gravy whistled when he saw it. "1792," he said. "That almost two hundred years ago. How do you think he's getting along now?"

I laugh at this but as I recall he didn't. I offer to show him the youngest one and he said that was my next question. We retrace our steps back out through the brambles and follow the stone wall around to the more recent section. It's right up against the wall, about two plots from the one I was digging, the youngest one, and you can hear traffic right over the wall. The mound hasn't even begun to sink yet and there are fresh flowers from the 2:00 service. My boot-print is still on the top of the mound. I do that. I don't know why - when I get done with the shoveling work on a grave I stamp my boot down on top to leave a mark.

"Kelly Koore," he read. "Did you know her?"

It's a strange question to ask someone. "No," I say.

"Did you see her funeral?"

"No, but I saw the burial," I say. Sometimes people think the funeral is the burial and sometimes they think the burial is the funeral. You tell me why. Then he asked me if there were many people there and when I say sure he asks how many. He seemed real interested so I thought it out to about twenty, twenty-five people. A good showing.

"Thirty," I say.

"Thirty," he repeated thoughtfully.

I tell him maybe I should be getting back to work but he shaked his head at that and said he only had two more questions. One was where did we keep our shovels and the other was would it be possible for him to dig out the plot he showed me. I tell him it can't be done until I get the slip for it to be dug. His hands were shaking real bad as he dropped his one cigarette and dug for the next. When the match glow hit his hands it reminds me it's getting darker and I get off in a few minutes.

"Why is that?" he asked. It's hard to watch how terrible his hands are shaking but mercifully he gets his cigarette lit and he can hide them in his pockets again. I tell him he can't dig it out early because there's no telling, obviously, when the job will need to be done and in the meantime it would fill up with rainwater and turn rotten at the bottom. I guess that's the real reason. But of course I never thought about it.

He only tells me he's a wood worker and he thinks it's best to finish every last part of a project, and that's the only way you can ever really own anything is to take care of all the details yourself. "There's not much you can own anymore," he said. "I mean *own*."

I asked him what he meant but felt bad about it when he said "I mean there's

not much that's even true. To have a notion to follow is a comfort."

For some reason I say my mother was an Irish Catholic.

"Did it help?"

"It helped her," I say. I'm struck by the truth and sadness in this, and how it's getting colder.

"That's good," he said. "But what about you?"

I turn my shoulder to him and go back over to the grave I was digging on. I put in a few strokes. He was still standing there all crooked up, waiting for an to answer. Then I stick the shovel in upright again and I tell him I don't understand what he's going on about, why all the questions and why somebody would dig a grave out early and why and old man would even hang around graves talking to diggers.

"Sorry," he said. I could see how his glasses were smudged with dirt and slightly crooked, and how thick they were. So thick they messed up how his eyes looked. Also this piece of his hair that stuck out from under his hat kept flying around in the wind. I wanted to tuck it behind his ear so much and get it out of the way that at first I was annoyed and then just sorry I was annoyed at all. "I'm sorry," is what he was saying. "I'm just sort of out of place. Everybody around here is into this or that. Me, I don't find much in most things. Take television. When I was out to my daughter's they never did anything else."

"Do you like 'Cop Story'?" I ask him. It's my favorite.

"I don't like much of anything," he said gloomily.

I went out on a limb and asked him to name three things he liked.

"Cigarettes," he said. "Menthols. That's one. I like finishing what I start and I like making what I need with my own hands."

"The last two don't count," I say. "They're not *things*. Name actual things, that you can touch."

Old man Gravy hunched his shoulders and then relaxed them. At first I didn't even realize it was a shrug and he was saying he couldn't think of any.

"Sorry, don't worry about it," I say.

Then the conversation took an odd turn. "What do you think about death," he asked me. His bent up old hands flapped their way out of his pockets and clamped themselves, one to my arm and one around the shovel. It startles me. "I don't know," I say. "What do you think about religion?" He was hissing. "I don't know," I say. His hands fall loose and he looked so let down and defeated I tell him I'm sorry.

"I'm sorry," I say, "I just never thought about all that before." He nods, and I don't know why but when he does you can't imagine how terrible I feel. The sun's going down below the bank roof now and it's getting more chilly. Then I do something that seems odd when I say it but it feels right at home out there. "Are you dying?" I ask him.

Old man Gravy reached out one of his hands, just this once it was still as can be, and he grabbed a hold of my earlobe real gentle, and gave it two tiny downward tugs. "I do like to finish what I start," he said. Then he asked me how much longer I was planning on working at Saint Mary's, and when I said I didn't know he asked me a personal favor.

I didn't know until about three weeks later when I cemented in the headstone that his name wasn't 'Gravy' at all- it was 'Granvy'. The way he said it, I thought it was Gravy.

So that's my story for your Amateur Summer Writing Contest. It fits in with the category "Conversation with a Stranger". I don't really write much, but I hope you find this story good enough to be published and also win the ten dollars.

Mike Sapp

Croquet

The wind died in the woods, but then there rose an awful rushing of the branches all lifting at once, clicking together and squeaking between their familiar bends. The wheels on the cart were packed with snow, so instead of rolling it behind me I had to drag it. The snow could only be seen falling against the backdrop of the lit streetlight, oddly out of place in the forest.

"There's snow everywhere," Denmede said.

"Nope," I said.

"It's at least four inches even in the shallow parts."

"Wait," I said. "You'll see."

"Jonas, I don't believe you woke me up for this."

"I wanted you along," I said. "It takes more than than one."

And so we walked. The closer we came to the street light the harsher the glare was through the spaces in the trees. The trail took one final, spastic bend then ended at a slippery decline. I carried the cart in front of me.

"Never," said Denmede, "I'm not playing croquet in a cemetery."

"It's not a cemetery, it's a graveyard. We use to come here all the time." It was just a tiny personal yard with a rusting gate hanging around it like a bent and dented crown. There were huge pine trees inside that had all the lower branches cut off above arms reach. The top branches were heavy and caught most of the snow and seemed to block the wind. The street light by the gate lit the yard, making everything in the circle stark white. Meanwhile, what little snow that managed to squirm between the branches sifted into the yard as through a screen, lighting on the shrubs and stones like an artist' touch-up.

"It's like Narnia," I said.

"Let's play out here."

"There's too much snow out there. We can play inside."

"Have you done it before?"

Not croquet. "Sure," I said, and pushed on the gate. It squeaked open on one hinge. Denmede followed me slowly. Feeling kind of kinky, huh? she asked, Is that it? I put the cart to the left of the gate and took the backpack. I got out the hoops and the hammer and laid them by the cart. Next I took the wine and held it up. It reflected my face, wild-eyed and hair-blown, super-imposed against several tall gravestones gone crazy in the glass. Snow was melting into beads on the side. I turned, and directly in front of me was the only monument- a four-foot angel with a green-mossed face and wide green wings bent to curving under the weight of flight. Her feet were molded into the three-foot base, which would be a problem with taking off into whatever glorious folds of sweet surrender she had been staring into for the fifty years since her construction. There were darker green lines all over her that marked off square sections. Me and her were old friends. I used to hide behind her base in the summer because my cousins didn't like the yard. I'd watch them pass the gate again and again from behind her legs. Sometimes they'd look in kind of longingly, like they knew where I was but were undecided if I was worth the chasing. It came to me to bless the wine before we drank it. Denmede's face was upturned toward the angel's.

"Cynthia," she said.

She had read the name. I popped the cork and offered her the bottle. She shook her head slowly, so I drank first.

Let us give thanks and praise.

"Here," I said, but I said it much too soft. I said it again. She took the bottle and drank. I began pounding in the hoops through the dusting on the ground. It was a small graveyard, so the course would be more round than long. I nailed the first two hoops to the right of Cynthia with the hammer.

I waited to nail in the heavy wooden pegs until last, because it would be better to nail them both in at once, like how my grandad had always done it. In three stokes of his arm the peg'd be sunk half-way in dirt. Denmede saw a picture of him in the cabin and said he looked like a lunatic green grocer. When was that? Tonight. It seemed longer. Denmede was pointing at the frame with all the pictures my grandmother had pasted together and hung above the oven, sort of snickering at the one in the center. There were twenty snapshots in twenty different shaped frames, some diamonds, some ovals, very few squares. I told her to bring it over. She unhooked it from the wall and laid it in front of me.

Lot of dust, she said. I wiped the glass with my sleeve. The dust rolled itself up into compact little snakes that I blew away.

That's my grandmother, I said, pointing to a corner oval. That's one time when we were picking berries or something. Maybe blackberries. I think that's my elbow. Denmede nodded. Here, look, this one's me. In a small diamond-shaped frame a nine-year old Jonas had his spindly nine-year old Jonas legs wrapped around the top of the low-field tire swing, arms extended, mouth rounded. Maybe it was a scream, or maybe a yelp of joy, I've forgotten and it's all silent now.

That rope use to rub our hands raw, I said. It had all these fibers that rain made stick out the side. When you grabbed it it was like grabbing an evil cactus.

I ran a finger over where the photo-rope diagonaled down from the branches and considered my side-turned head. Funny how we swung on it anyway, I said.

Even with your legs, she said and laughed. I nodded. Where's this? She was pointing to a pentagon of the lake.

That way. I tilted my head to indicate direction. You could see it out the front windows if it was light, I said.

Fish?

She meant was there any.

Sure, I said. Blue gills and bass and we let loose a crate of carp when I was seven, but we never saw any of them. She shifted her stance so she could lean over my shoulder. I said, I use to go out on the raft and when the blue gills would swim up I'd try to leap out and land on them. That was summer, when I tried that. I never got one. Probably because of refraction or defraction or something that distorted the looks of it. I considered the still waves, so much like a rumpled grey sheet. Maybe now that I'm educated I could jump on a fish, I said.

She offered me a cigarette. I shook my head. There was also a circle-framed picture of my grandfather's old garden, with tomatoes so red they threatened to split on the vine. He was looking up at the camera with a cantaloupe in one hand and three cucumbers in the other, smiling slyly. He was squinting even though he had on his huge-brimmed straw hat. This was the one she had laughed at.

What, did you quit?

Yes, I said. She meant cigarettes.

That's probably good for you, she said and lit up by the kitchen window. She laid her

lighter on the tiny sill and turned to me. It's really coming down now, she said, There's more snow in the air than air. She stared and smoked, my grandfather squinted eternal.

There was a shock that ran up my arm when I pounded in the peg. It surprised me at first. All the while that I was setting the course Denmede stood stock still by the fence. She must have heard too many stories about what goes on in country graveyards after dark. When I was finished my hands were red and slow from the chill. I tossed the hammer toward the gate and looked at Denmede. Hon, she said, Why are we doing this? I didn't answer. How about we go back and light a fire? she said.

"Pick your color," I said.

She looked at the column of balls and said "Blue."

"Get it. I'm green. You go first. We go in order of the colors of the peg."

She tossed the green ball to me. Somewhat angry. She's the sort that doesn't like being out in the snow, the sort that likes the idea of snow but can't stand the chill. The blue ball was under all the other colors, so she pulled each ball out of the tube and set them in a row until she reached her color. She passed me with her ball and her mallet, measured out a length from the peg, and knocked it through the first two hoops. It slowed quickly in the snow. "You should have hit it harder," I said. She nodded.

My ball came through the first two hoops with no problem. The mallet sounded hollow and loud on the ball. My next shot landed me very close to Denmede's ball, so I oriented myself and knocked them together.

"Symbolic," she said. That's a joke we have that started in high school, that we're part of a story, and things that seem like a part of ordinary life are, for us, finely- tuned symbolism. She always figured us for a novel, but I like the idea of recurring figures in lots of short stories, like Nick Adams.

"True. But it's also just good playing. No hard feelings." I placed my ball behind hers and a little to the right and hit. I ended on the good side of the hoop, while she was off to the side. That's an old grandfather trick from way back.

I took the wine from Cynthia's pedestal and drank deep. Denmede hit her ball back to get it lined up for the third hoop. It hit the wire and stopped there. She considered her situation sadly. I passed her the bottle.

"Drink it off," I told her.

She took it. "Trying to get me drunk?" She smiled.

"If you don't want it don't drink it."

"I'm only kidding. Jesus you get weird up here."

At first I thought she meant the yard. She meant the mountain in general. "All we ever got to do was go to the ocean for vacation," she said. "You know how that gets after the second day. You get pretty weird up here and all, but it is nice."

"It's okay. It's not as good anymore as it used to be," I said.

"You mean with all the stripping and mining?"

"No, that's always been here," I said. "I just mean it doesn't seem the same. I don't know, the feel of it or the air or something, it's not as . . . Well, I use to feel like I was in a jungle or something, but it's . . . " I shook my head like I was trying to shake the meaning out of it. "It'd take a better man than me to make it make sense."

I took the bottle from her stiff white fingers and tasted it again. And again. I said, "If you brought a kid up here and sat him by me, you could see the difference."

"What, between you and a kid?"

"No, between then and now." I laughed out my nose at myself and shook my head. "I guess I'm putting on a buzz," I said, and very lightly shook the bottle.

On her next shot she got lined up for her hoop and on my next shot I got through the center and shot towards the next one. My ball hit off a stone marker and bounced into the shrubs by the fence. Denmede laughed.

When I was by the half-way peg she asked me if I knew anyone in the yard. No, I said, they came with the property.

"Some deal," she said.

"True." My hands were beefy-red because I kept forgetting to warm them in my pockets. One hand was always on the mallet and the other was always holding the wine or making ready to hold it. Even so, I felt oddly warm. Illusion. Somehow my socks had gotten wet inside my boots and they had fallen down around my instep. Denmede looked miserable too. On her next turn I sat with my back against a stone: *Jacob Phillops 1903-1946*. My right boot was next to a hoop. Denmede rested beside me. Put her arm out under the incline of my back. Who do you have, I asked. She looked. Martha Phillops, she said. I have Jacob, maybe they're married, I said. Hm, she said and let her head fall against my neck. She had a wet forehead. That's nice, she purred, being married. Being dead, I replied. We were in the shade of the Phillops, but the rest of the yard was still illuminated whitely.

"Tired?" she asked. I admitted I was. "Do you want to go back?"

"No," I said.

"We could leave the balls here, and come back tomorrow."

"I'd like to leave them here all winter and come back when it's warm or even years from now. We can come back and finish the game when we're old and bent from too many years of living under gravity. It'd be a huge event, because all these years people have passed by and seen the hoops set up and wondered to themselves about who's blue and who's green, and why it was stopped in the middle, and when they'll be back. It'd be a legend. And when we finally come back it'd be a huge celebration with a big round table under the light for refreshments and we'd finish it all up and our kids and grandkids would be in bleachers over there somewhere, cheering us on, and the winner would be a hero, and the loser would be, too."

"The things you say," she said. "Let's do it; we could, you know."

"I doubt it." She passed me the wine, and it was very light. I finished it and set the bottle above my head. "I really doubt it."

"I'm getting tired," she said.

"Hm."

"And I can't remember ever being this cold before."

"True."

"What do you think?"

I didn't look at her. I looked at some faded plastic flowers by one of the trees. They had no color, just a peachy flesh tone for every part- stems, leaves, petals, pink. It reminded me of something raw. "We can quit anytime," I said. "We can't always continue."

"Well then do you have any kleenex?"

"Nope," I said.

"My nose is running just terrible."

"Mine too." I took a wipe at it and held it above the stone so light hit my fingers.

"Is that *blood?*" she said.

"It's the altitude. It always happens."

"Geez," she said mournfully, "Geez geez geez."

And then, very slowly, the wind started to rise again. It began the pines on a slow rock. "Symbolic," I said. She picked right up on it and said that wind was symbolic for a cleansing of the soul.

I smiled. "It'll have to blow harder than that," I said.

She whistled out low to let me know she disagreed. Change of subject imminent. You start Monday? Denmede asked, flicking her laces. I had to look at her face to understand. Yeah, I said. Monday. She said, It's a good job. Sure, I said.

Filler. "Ready?"

She grabbed her mallet and, like a bent up old woman with a crutch, rose to her feet.

"My grandfather was a god at this," I said, looking up at Denmede and smiling. "I always won until he came down to the field. He was amazing. He could hit balls fifteen, twenty feet away."

"Are you okay," she asked. I nodded. "Is the wine gone?"

"Yup," I said.

"Really and for truly?"

"Dead and buried," I said. She smiled. I was on the center hoop again, going in the opposite direction towards the end. But I had to keep reminding myself to go slow on this one, because the hoops were pegged in among the baby graves: thirty or so fist-high, unmarked stones with rough edges, set only about a foot and a half apart. I over-shot the hoop.

"The snow stopped," Denmede said.

I looked up. "When did that happen?" We didn't know. There was a pale lip on the edge of the sky. I asked her what time he thought it was. No Idea, she said.

"Your shot."

"True." She was back on the half-way peg, mired helplessly in a freak rise of snow. She shot from the side and the ball rolled up the incline then slid back down into the same hollow. She looked at it a second and said "Croquet's not really a winter sport."

"What is it?"

"A summer sport," she said.

Summer sport, I thought. What was that? Summer. More than just a few seasons away. We played softball in the low field, had to watch out for snakes in the heat. Snakes, they like heat. I've known that forever. "Snakes in the summer," I said.

"Hm? Did you ever get bit by one?" She seemed smugly happy with the idea.

"No," I said.

"Did you ever bite one?" She was smiling. I nodded. Polite. Always be polite.

"No," I said.

"Ever kill one?"

I could have answered it or I could have ignored it and took my shot. "Yes," I said. "I was famous."

"Famous?" She coughed.

"I killed twelve in one afternoon." She considered that quite a feat, I could tell from her expression. She sat down against Cynthia and looked at me with her white face, waiting. "With a snake," I said, "What you do is take a stick and break their spine. Snakes are all spine." Little laugh. "I didn't have a stick but I had some wire I was fooling with, real thick, thick as a pinky, and stiff. I saw a fat black rattlesnake all wrapped around a tree by the road, they can just hold on to the bark with the muscles in their belly like that, and I took the wire and broke her in four or five pieces. When she stopped moving I balanced her on the end and carried her back to the cabin."

That's the first snake? she asked. Her voice seemed weird. Disconnected. "We laid her on a board," I said, "and cut her down the side with a pocketknife because someone wanted it skinned and I said sure. And it was pregnant and eleven tiny little shoe-lace snakes slid out with little malformed rattles on the tails." Geez, Denmede said. Supporting to the end. "They laid them in a row on the board, and what a hot day it was, and they skinned the big one. It's on somebody's hatband." Geez, she said again. I smiled slowly: Symbolic? Sure, she said, snakes represent evil, you're the great redeemer.

"Sure," I said, "Sure."

"Jonas, are you okay?"

"I feel kind of guilty, remembering."

"The Guilty Redeemer, then." She smiled and quietly urged me to join her.

Denmede made up a good distance on her next turn while I sat on Cynthia's pedestal and hugged her green legs. I stayed there and watched her shots. They were slow and had a sense of finality to them, maybe something in the way she hit hard, usually without even more than a glance at where she was shooting.

And then it was my turn. But I didn't want to shoot, for some reason even if it was a good shot, I'd rather leave my ball in the small rise of white close to the last two hoops. I'm an idiot about some things, always was, my cousins use to scream at me to let go of the rope and hang with my legs but I was scared and the ground was high and hard on the swing back. I guess I did it. I guess I was alright, here I am, I guess I tucked my head and the ground shushed by, I guess I came out fine.

I knocked the ball through the hoop so I could take my next shot close to the last two Another grandfather trick. He could be leaning against that tree now, with his hat casting shadow on his face, but he'd still he'd squint, and smile, he'd see all his smooth old moves being uncoordinated in my body, jerking them too hard or too fast. But I'm learning, I'm learning.

The ball stopped only inches from the first of the two clumped hoops. So easy nowdays. The sun was coming up pale red over the mountains, like a long and twisted scar. Like that burn from the rope when I tried that act again. It cut me. My head hit the ground. You're too big, they said. Everytime I looked at the woods it was a shade paler. Easy. I took it one hoop at a time: Tap. The others swung on it but for me the fibers stood on needlly end. Tap. The ball stopped two inches from the peg. Peg or Poison? Keep the game rolling or clip it off here? Time to decide.

What are you doing? she called. I couldn't move. The air had finally frozen inside me and inside my thoughts. What are you doing, she asked again. They never told me that once you were big the rope would cut your legs, I said. The added weight of gravity over time, she said. She asked why I was crying. I told her the game was almost over.

"That makes me happy," she said.

"A fundamental difference between our characters," I said. "You see something and

you see what it is. I see something and I wrap it up in all this extra baggage like it's more than it seems. It was only a swing, this is only a grave-yard, this is only snow, only wind, only one snake and only a game. I keep thinking everything's more."

"Maybe it is," she said.

I pushed the ball with the mallet, slowly, slowly, until it stopped against the peg. Tap.

"Game's over," I said, "Give me a cigarette, let's go home."

It was very bright out now. I could see the woods weren't as thick as they looked, or as thick as they used to be.

The Hymn of Bean Bonnie

There goes Bean Bonnie.
Under barbed wire, slowly

Dissolving in a farm field 40 miles from her
flower pot: moist, spotted, sprouting

grass water lungs that
blackelephantscream.

Bean screams in damp ginseng bloodsap.
Feet taught like taproot.

Nothing left to do but rub angels on
the breast.

Whistle old Pinnochio songs in some
bombed out alley.

Blackelephantscreams buckle to Bean's waist socket now.
Like a heron gouging march melons, they carve beak lacerations,
bruises down
her
spine.

Undertoe, hyacinths grow.
Coarse, wired; they make fenceposts.

Nothing left but my navel, clear as a halo.
Dark as a chamber pot.

Petals melt on Black's back now like tongues
almost touching:

vegetable tongues licking Bean naked, soothing
sore throats.

Bean melts into a puddle of broth.
Carboflesh for next seasons harvest, she sings

Like firecrackers as the stadium lights go out.
Bam! Bip! Zorp-cloat! Bong!

Morgan Huff

The Hymn of Bean Bonnie

Down she goes with the nuptials.
Skin like a riverbed, bean marrow
under black mud

Sometimes a body just rots.

Fish don't lie.

1.

"Feels just like fish scales."
But paint never swims, as I should've known,
smacking my palm against old porch post,
blue latex flaking off like eyelashes.

"It's got lead in it though. . .
At least looks like a fish."

And fish it is. My porch,
an aqua-marine manta-ray, laying out to
dry in sleepdrunk dusk, I on the spine.
Always on top o' the spine, saluting:

"It takes seven years before all the atoms in our body are re-
placed."

And it'll be another seventy before we go into space.
Clumps sweeping each other up to form a ball: jovian flesh planet,
charbroiled star.

2.

Paint flaking dry in dead fingers, I speak
proverbs to passing birds.

Hypnobreathing on a blue peeling porch,
eager afternoon.

Wondering now if bits o' lead are targeting my heart's river.
Or staging a blitzkrieg stomp atop the sponges of my brain.

Beginning what we know as cancer,
or consumption: a poison
draining down
my translucent
skull cover.

3.

On leaving my home,
I'll go alone

singing: "If you find honey, eat just enough."

Just enough.
Never let yourself throw up.
Vomit tastes of vampire plasm
drawn up from stale arteries like syrup.

But you say: "Ain't nothin' gonna' up-chuck when our holy soul moves".
But others say: "Ain't no soul moving here. It's only soil movement".

Soil movement, mineral grooving, molten mantle grind.
This is how scientists think the earth may have formed.
A bubbling ovum, pregnant with glistening tadpoles and fish.

That's Genesis: a pilchard maelstrom, shivering in rhythm
just to forget they're homeless even in mud.
Hear them whisper: "What's all this blackness?"

And hear the preacher say: "You've swum rightupa'ginst God's feet, my friend."

4.

Wind still down
ear plumbing,
world becomes
an aquarium.

Human re-
flexes melt.
Become gills.
Fins.

Say I: "Will my body burn if I touch the mud?"
But this is no mud.
It's a proverb: Within the sea is the sun.

Enormously
Hot and moist.

Br-
ache-
ing

And the people say: "Ah! (sigh) Men."

6.

But men build towers nestling up against swaddling cloud cover.
Men are PROUD of such acupuncture.
We've been back and forth between Babylon and space
since the beginning of time.

"But baptismal didn't make gristle of men back then" thinks I,
rewinding my gaze across back porch paint fissures,
silent dust and decomposing planks:

"And once upon a time this menagerie of wood and nails was alive."

Now days, some call it 'porch' others 'patio'.
I thought it looked like a manta-ray just two hours ago.
But no. A fish would've swum to the Sun's core by now,

Followed it's breeding water during evaporation.
That's what sunspots really are: charred fishes,
bobbing up on gas spikes. The cool cruel world

lost in their
Eyes.

7.

But fish don't lie.
They collect together like mineral tears.
This I know. . . asked the breeze last year:

"And tell me what holds up the world?"

Beastly and breathless, choraling down me ear,
breeze say: "A herring."
Says me: "What holds up the herring?"
Wind again: "Another herring."
And Eye: "What holds up that herring?"
Breeze frothing at length: "My boy, my child.
listen and I'll tell you.

It's another herring.
So don't ask any more screwy questions.
It is herrings
          herrings
          herrings

All the way
down.

Morgan Huff

Memo from the mortician's lover.

Suddenly, you don't pale like you once did,
asthma welling up across a tan faded and gone,
face half-dead.

You ask how milk can replenish itself,
how each pore like an open pupil sucks wildly,
a beast breathing.

Honestly, can't you see anything but the eyes of you heroine?
Glare in the sky and on watch faces?

A black angel floats above, watching people like us
hack milk nipple hairballs just to breathe: *Laugh on angel!*
Laugh on. Inhale our oxygen grave.

But dare we rage at this juncture within our repiratory systems
against night? Should I warm the oatmeal? Put on a sweater?
Strap my nekid flesh to the radiator below?

Behind, a chill breeze goes pregnant in blowfish cloud cover.
Your jaws grate, flint-yawn rainwash: Tongue begets a baby flare
filling the womb you'd call 'mouth'.

Soon enough, flame babe sparks up. Just a hum you'd call 'voice'.
Red spiked like cigar ash in throats coal cavern,
a silent esophagus burning.

We row out now, one oar in the river.
Glare on your exposed organs dripping clot and crimson.
Juices almost black once agitated by the oxygen,

Almost capsizing our canoe, as you tear handfulls of liver and kidney
out of that balloon you'd call 'body', fist half-way past your solar-
plexus, squashing aorta pipes like so much filthy plumbing.

Cheeks veined as a maple leaf, a voice
bubbles blood and verb from behind your teeth: *I'll fill*
ten thousand mouths with just a wafer of mucus membrane,

Ribs decaying like a cradle for bodies
outside the body.

After all, you reason: *We'll be built as surely as the tumble and drift of sediment*
builds shale, a thousand years from now. Bodies born, bodies dead.
Didn't actually have to hawk the stuff.

Tan faded and gone, face half-dead, glare in the sky and on fingernails.
Hauling our canoe back through the mud. Water down stream drops
without draining: *My love, my love. Listen! There is no danger.*

Morgan Huff

Sleepwalking by a pond at night

As a moon becalms on water now, your
being becalms on you, floating weightlessly
downward from atop an orchid to rest on

a lower branch.

Phosphene light gather in kitchen windows, green
locust burn like grease on a hot skillet as you walk by
one cricket then another, one year and the next, barely

navigating your steps through the tall marsh grass.

Daubed with mud and moonshine, how broadly you smile
out from black cypresses, how anywhere you drop you foot
there is a firmness underneath.

Gums receding, you remember some other evening:

I was so sleepdrunk at the house, she had said.
You were so quiet at the lake. . . If you kill me,
eat me. But don't forget my name.

A soul is only soil, really. A mirror only water.
Barefoot and barechested, you walk out into a grove,
palms out shouting: Alone, Alone!

Eyes, not brown, but clear. And lo!
Dead trees come into bloom.

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